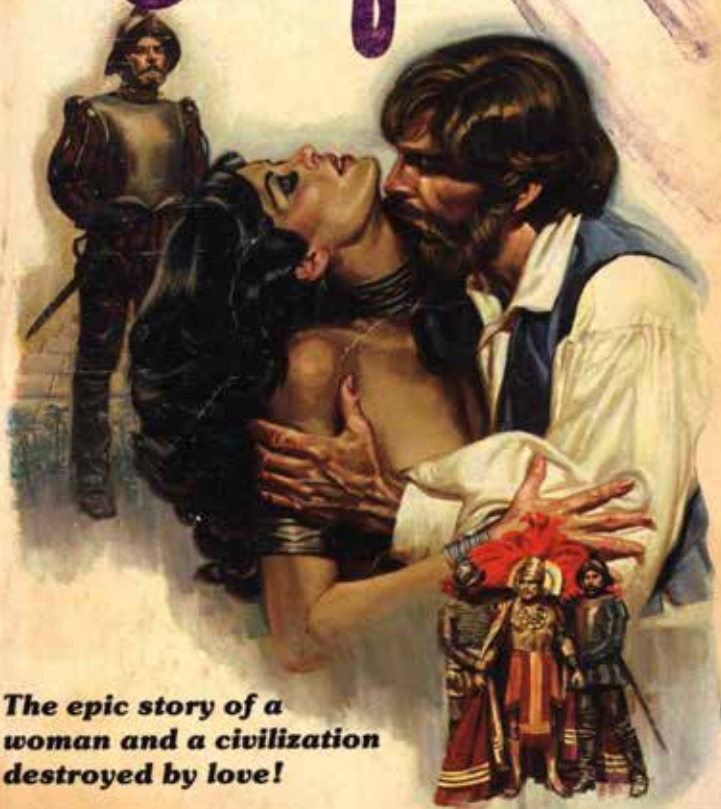


BT
51260
CDC
\$1.95

Ralph Hayes

Love's Dark Conquest



**The epic story of a
woman and a civilization
destroyed by love!**

IN HER LAND SHE WAS A PRINCESS, IN HIS ARMS SHE WAS A SLAVE!

From the moment the captive Indian princess first set eyes on the golden-bearded Cortez, she knew her world would never again be the same. Christened Marina on the Spanish general's flagship, the beautiful young girl became his interpreter, his trusted counsellor, and his mistress.

In the name of love, Marina abandoned her people, betrayed her country and desecrated her gods. But though she gave up everything for her lover, she began to fear that he was a dangerous and driven man who could never belong to any one woman.

Swept along on the bloody tide of Cortez' assault on the proud and warlike Aztecs, Marina fought an even greater battle with her own rebellious heart.

1208

To the Indian Princess, He was a god

"You have become more than an interpreter tonight," Cortez told her. "Your counsel is very important to me. If you were Spanish and a man, I would give you a commission."

"I want only your respect and affection, General," Marina replied.

Cortez touched her cheek with his hand, and her face flushed under the light caress. "You have both," he said quietly. He stroked her cheek, and needles of excitement prickled down her neck and back. "You are a beautiful girl, Marina. Your beauty touches me."

"Thank you, General," she whispered.

"Will you come to my room, little bird?" he asked her. "It would please me very much."

Marina suddenly felt faint. Cortez was god-like to her. She felt herself tremble inside as she replied.

"Yes, my general," she whispered.

PAPERBACKS
162 Bay Street
PO Orchard 887-7241

SORRY NO RETURN

We will send you a free catalog on request. Any titles not in your local book store can be purchased by mail. Send the price of the book plus 35¢ shipping charge to Belmont Tower Books, Two Park Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

Titles currently in print are available in quantity for industrial and sales promotion use at reduced rates. Address inquiries to our Promotion Department.

SORRY NO RETURN

LOVE'S DARK CONQUEST

Ralph Hayes

BELMONT TOWER BOOKS • NEW YORK CITY

A BELMONT TOWER BOOK

Published by

Tower Publications, Inc.
Two Park Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10016

Copyright © 1978 by Tower Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Chapter One

There were almost thirty of them in the cramped quarters of the galleon hold, including the two squalling children of an unwed Tabascan mother. They had passed three days and nights aboard, jammed between the Spaniards' nervous horses and the dull-glistening muzzles of field cannons, suffocating in the afternoons and shivering through the black, uncertain hours of early morning. The place was musty-damp and grossly malodorous with manure, human excrement, and unwashed bodies. No hammocks or pallets had been made available to them, so they slept in whatever position they could find on the floor or against a bulkhead. That was when the big rats came to harass them, and the roaches as fat as a man's thumb.

They had been given to the white-skinned invaders at that first landing down the coast, as a kind of peace offering, after the Spaniards had made their cannons roar and the outskirts of Tabasco were littered with the bloody, torn corpses of defenders. Now, on this bright, tropical morning with yellow sunlight angling down from a square hatchway overhead, the small group came slowly awake with the realization that the fleet had at last anchored

again, in the night, and that this initial ordeal was almost over.

In a corner of their enclosure a little away from the others sat a young woman whose skin was a lighter bronze color than that of the others, and whose hair was long, sleek and black-shining. Her features were more Caucasian than Indian, and her body was young and slim under the roughly-woven Tabascan dress that came to her ankles and was caught around the waist with a rawhide belt. She had been awake before dawn, anticipating a debarkation from the ship, but she had not spoken to any of the others around her. In the night, a young Tabascan man had attempted to make love to her, and she had clawed scratches across his face in defense. He sat well away from her now, looking dark and moody. The Tabascans were not her people, and she felt no affinity toward them, even now. She wanted only to get off the galleon and find out what the Spaniards intended to do with her.

As the sun climbed higher and cast more of its brightness into the hold, the group became more animated and began listening with anxiety to the clanking of armor on deck above them, as the Spanish soldiers moved about. After a while there was a lot of rapid chatter up there in the exotic language that was so foreign to their ears. An older woman turned to the young, pretty one who sat by herself, and spoke gruffly to her.

"You know their strange tongue," she said accusingly. "What are they saying? Are they going to trade us to the Aztecs? Or will we be sacrificed to the Spanish gods?"

A couple of others close by, a thin woman and a grizzled old man, turned now to hear the young woman's reply.

"The white faces have only one god, but he is very powerful and does not require human blood to sustain him. He—"

She stopped and turned to the hatchway ladder, as did all of them crouched together there. A sailor was climbing down into the hold. A quick silence fell as he came down to the bottom of the ladder and turned to them. He was a husky fellow with a red beard and a gold ear-ring in his ear. He wrinkled his nose at the odors that assailed his nostrils, and peered from one of their faces to another.

"Who is the one called Malinche?" he said in a deep voice, speaking Spanish.

The young woman sitting by herself narrowed her eyes slightly, and rose to a standing position. "I am Malinche," she said in a soft but strongly-accented Spanish.

The sailor's face changed when he saw her, and he looked her over appreciatively. "You are the girl who knows Spanish?"

She nodded. "Yes, a little."

He beckoned to her. "You are to come with me. The captain-general wishes to see you."

There was a quiet murmuring among them. "The golden-bearded god-king!" someone said in a hushed voice.

The young woman felt her face flush with sudden fear and excitement. She could hardly believe that the great one himself wanted to see her personally. He spoke only to tribal kings and to priests.

"Me?" she said softly. "Are you sure?"

"I'm certain!" he said harshly to her. "Come, quickly!"

A moment later she was climbing the ladder into the sunlight of the deck, squinting in the sudden glare. She stepped onto the main deck cautiously,

bewildered by the sights and sounds around her. Everywhere were metal-breast-plated soldiers, carrying the arquebus pistols and muskets that exploded like thunder and killed like lightning, and stacks of ammunition and supplies. Yellow dogs barked around their feet. Beyond the rigging of the tall-masted galleon lay the placid turquoise of the small harbor they had anchored in, some other ships, and a jungly shoreline. In the bow of the ship, beyond the heads of the soldiers who now stared at her, was the captain-general, seated on a sturdy ship's chair. She recognized him instantly, as she had seen him at a distance, at Tabasco, on his triumphal entry into the town. Sitting facing him was an Aztec in formal attire, with worked cape and plumed headdress, decorated with gold jewelry and semi-precious stones. In a circle around the two stood several Spaniards and Aztecs, the retinue of their lords.

"Come!" the sailor commanded her.

She followed him timidly to the assemblage at the bow. When they arrived there, the sailor saluted smartly. "My captain, this is the girl you asked for."

The captain-general turned to her, and so did the rest of the small assemblage around him, including the Aztecs. A thin-faced Spaniard in the group spoke when he saw her.

"Yes, this is the one! She was pointed out to me in Tabasco. The story is that she was taught Spanish by a shipwrecked sailor." He walked over to her, his armor clanking. Like the Aztecs who had traveled all the way across the isthmus to greet these strange-looking men from across the great sea, the Spaniards were dressed to impress their counterparts.

"I am Aguilar," the thin fellow smiled at her. "And you are Malinche?"

"My given name is Ce Malinalli," she said, her mouth dry. "The Tabascans call me Malinche because I am of the Malin tribe, remote from here."

The captain-general leaned forward on his chair. "Come here, Ce Malinalli," he said to her in a deep voice.

She felt her heart pounding inside her as she went to his side. He was dressed in armor, too, but was bareheaded, and his hair and beard were almost blonde. He was a strikingly handsome man, and surprisingly young. He reached out his hand to her, and she hesitatingly touched it, and it was warm and strong.

"I am Hernando Cortez," he told her pleasantly.

She dropped to her knee, and bowed her head. "I am honored, my lord."

"And this is Lord Tendile of the Aztec nation," Cortez added, gesturing toward the plumed dignitary across from him.

She turned and bowed again, touching the deck with her hand and then bringing her fingers to her lips, in a show of fealty to the nobleman of the Aztecs who ruled the entire isthmus. Tendile nodded and smiled stiffly at her. He and the other three Aztec lords who had come aboard with him were taller, more handsome, and better clothed than the Tabascans she had lived with or the Malins she had known as a child.

Cortez was surprised and a little nettled at the deliberate display of fealty by the young woman toward the Aztecs. "All right, you may rise, Ce—"

"Malinalli, my lord," she helped him, standing.

Captain-general Cortez looked up slightly to her. "The names of your people are difficult for us. While you are with us, you shall be called Dona Marina, because we found you by the sea, at Tabasco."

"Yes, my lord."

Cortez sat back in his sturdy chair then, and a morning breeze from the water ruffled his light hair, and he looked very much like a god-emissary to her, which was what the Tabascans believed him to be, with his thunderous cannons and iron suit and frightening horses.

"You speak Nahuatl in addition to your limited Spanish?" Cortez now asked her seriously.

"Yes, my lord. Nahuatl and Mayan, the two great languages of Anahuac."

Cortez raised his eyebrows slightly. "Excellent. We are having some difficulty in making ourselves understood to the Lord Tendile and his associates. Perhaps you can help us?"

"I will try, my lord," the girl now called Marina told him. She stood beside Cortez' chair, facing Tendile and his gaudily-clothed and decorated companions. Beside Cortez with her were the fellow Aguilar, two captains of cavalry named Diaz and Alvarado, and a priest in brown robes with a gold cross on his chest. Between Cortez and Tendile were objects of gold and silver on a woven mat, that had been brought as offerings of friendship by Tendile. Around the two groups of men stood many armor-clad cavaliers now, their interest in the proceedings aroused with the arrival of Marina.

"These gentlemen have traveled for several days to meet us at our landing here," Cortez now continued to her. "Lord Tendile comes from the great emperor named Montezuma, of whom you have undoubtedly heard."

She turned to him. "Oh, yes, my lord."

"They have been onboard for almost an hour, but we have made little headway in understanding,

except that we have thanked Tendile and Montezuma for these fine gifts. Now I would like you to express to Lord Tendile my desire to meet with Montezuma personally, in his great city across the mountains."

Marina turned to Cortez with ill-hidden surprise. "You would go to Tenochtitlan, my lord?"

Cortez nodded. "Or wherever the great emperor Montezuma wishes to meet with us." At that moment, a warm, dry gust of wind from the shore struck Cortez and made him narrow his eyes against its rough caress, very different from the sea breeze that had favored him and his ships.

Marina turned to Tendile and his retinue and repeated Cortez' message in slow, melodic Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. Tendile listened impassively, but Marina noticed a slight anxiety building behind the stolid facade. Two of the three men with him, younger than he, did not have his poise, and their expressions became quite agitated as she finished.

There was a long silence then, with only the breeze in their ears, the dull creaking of the flagship galleon, and an occasional scraping of metal on metal as a Spanish cavalier moved in his armor. Finally, Tendile spoke to her in Nahuatl.

"You speak our language with an accent. Did I hear you say that you are Malin?"

"Yes, my lord," Marina replied. "My first tongue was Mayan."

"And how is it that you lived with the Tabascans?"

Marina lowered her eyes. "I was sold by my royal mother into slavery," she said almost inaudibly. "To guarantee the succession of my half-brother by her second marriage."

Tendile's face softened slightly. "Then you yourself are of royal blood."

"Yes, my lord."

Tendile sat there thinking for a long moment while Cortez and his captains waited to learn what was happening. He was a middle-aged Indian with some gray in his black hair, and lines around his eyes. But he was proud-looking, and handsome.

"We will honor your lineage, despite your present situation, Ce Malinalli. It is the way of the Aztecs."

"I thank you, Lord Tendile," she said quietly.

The armored soldier named Alvarado, whose hair and beard were even more blonde than those of Cortez, leaned down over Cortez' shoulder and spoke to him, his hair blowing into his face. "What are they saying? Why doesn't she translate for us?"

Aguilar turned to them. "I understand a little Nahuatl. I think she just told him that she's a princess. We may have gotten more than we bargained for in this girl."

Cortez' eyes narrowed slightly on Marina then, and he noticed for the first time her perfect carriage, and the sleekness of her black hair, and the perfect lines of her bronze body under the coarse cloth she was dressed in.

"Well, well," he muttered.

Tendile's face had now hardened slightly, as he began to speak again. "Now you may give this message to the pale-skin named Cortez," he said slowly and deliberately. "Montezuma denies the yellow-beard's claim that he is the emissary of the great god Quetzalcoatl, as the peasants across the land are muttering. He is accepted as a lord, but emperors do not meet with lords, and Montezuma will not suffer an invasion of Anahuac or Tenochtit-

lan by these iron-suits. He suggests rather that Cortez accept the gifts offered as the first and last measure of goodwill from our great emperor, and depart immediately for his homeland, before he brings down the wrath of Huitzilopotchli and the Aztec nation upon his enterprise."

Marina was stunned by the import of Tendile's short speech, and noticed now the suppressed anger in his face, and wondered whether Tendile had not expressed his emperor's message rather too strongly. Glancing around her, she saw the hard faces of the Spanish soldiers, awaiting her translation, and noted the swords and arquebus pistols at their sides. She swallowed hard and turned to the grim-faced Cortez, remembering the death and destruction she had seen at Tabasco.

"Lord Tendile says, my lord," she began, her heart thumping at her chest, "that Montezuma takes great pleasure in this first communication from the powerful monarch of Spain, through the captain-general, who is the emissary also of the Spanish god. The emperor regrets that he could not be present at this interview with the captain-general, but the distance from the capital was very great on this journey, and the way beset with too many dangers and difficulties to make the trip feasible. His hope is, therefore, that these gifts will be accepted as evidence of his goodwill, and that they will encourage you to return to your beloved Spain with friendship in your hearts for the emperor and his people."

Her cheeks blazed as she finished, not knowing how much of Tendile's speech might have been understood by Aguilar or others of the Spaniards, or how much of her translation had been understood

by Tendile. She watched Cortez' face as it fell into straight lines. He had expected an invitation to the Aztec capital.

Cortez looked deliberately away from Tendile, sulking. Marina wondered what his reaction would have been if she had translated exactly. "Tell Tendile," Cortez finally said in a curt voice, "that we did not come all the way from Cuba to be turned back so easily. Whether Montezuma desires it or not, we will plant the cross of Christianity wherever it will flourish across his Mexican empire of Anahuac. And we will start here!"

Marina regarded Cortez as if he had lost his mind, shocked for the second time in a few minutes. No one could talk to the god-emperor Montezuma in this manner! Not without bringing down the fury of all the Aztec gods upon his head.

She turned numbly to Tendile, while the Spaniards and Aztecs waited.

"Lord Tendile," she began quietly. "The captain-general says that the distance is too great to return immediately to his home-land, because of the condition of his ships and his men. Also, he is hopeful that before he leaves this great country, the most powerful Montezuma will grant him a humble audience, so that he may fulfill the primary object of his voyage, and be able to return to his own monarch in honor rather than disgrace."

Tendile rose from the chair the Spaniards had given him to sit on, and looked down on Cortez haughtily, but keeping his composure. "An audience with the emperor is out of the question, you may assure him. Furthermore, if he and his ships are not gone from these shores within the week, I cannot guarantee his safety here. Please convey these

matters to him in no uncertain terms."

Cortez rose, too, as Marina turned to him. "Well?" he said. "What is his answer?"

"My lord, Tendile wishes you well until you are able to leave the hospitality of his shores. Because of pressing matters of state, the emperor will not be able to meet with you before your departure, but he wishes you a speedy and safe journey back, when you are able to sail."

Cortez stared into Tendile's hard, impassive eyes for a long moment. "The emperor may have a long wait," he said deliberately. "Tell Tendile that I expect to see Montezuma and Tenochtitlan before I leave this land."

Marina turned to Tendile a last time. "The captain-general says he will not give up hope of basking in the radiant presence of the emperor before his eventual departure, nor of walking the streets of his beautiful capital."

Tendile snorted. "Enough has been said. He has had our warning. Now we will go."

There were a few formal words of parting then, with Marina's assistance, and then Tendile left the flagship with his entourage. Cortez stood at the gunwale and watched their boats return to shore, as the thin fellow Aguilar came over to Marina.

"I know some Nahuatl," he said, grinning shyly at her. "You saved a potentially bad situation, Marina. I wish we had had you at Tabasco."

She shrugged. "Before my father died, he taught me that the wrong choice of emotionally-charged words can obscure communication. I hope I did not do a wrong thing."

Aguilar smiled at her hesitating speech and heavy accent. "You managed to maintain peace and

harmony in a situation where I thought it was impossible," Aguilar told her. He had soft, dark eyes and a long nose, and did not look very military, even in the armor. "We were all tense about this first encounter with the fabled Aztecs. You made it easier for us. Look, here comes the general to thank you."

Cortez had turned from the gunwale, and now came over to them, with the brown-robed priest close behind him, speaking darkly into his ear. Cortez came and stood very close to Aguilar and Marina, and he seemed very overpowering to her, in his armor and beard.

"They are an arrogant race, your Aztecs," he said to Marina.

"They are very powerful, my lord," Marina said quietly. "All other tribes of Anahuac pay fealty to them and tremble under their rule."

Cortez nodded. "Do you tremble?"

Marina hesitated. "No, I do not."

Cortez smiled, and the smile dazzled her. She felt her cheeks suddenly flushing. "You're the daughter of a tribal chieftain?" he said to her.

"Yes, my lord."

"You may call me simply General," he told her.

"Yes, General."

"I lost my temper with Tendile," he went on, "and I think you helped me out a little. I want to thank you."

"It was my honor," Marina said.

Cortez studied her lovely bronze face for a long moment. "Do you worship the bloodthirsty gods of the Mexicas?" he asked her solemnly.

Marina thought for a moment. "The Valley of Mexico gods are different from our Malin ones," she said. "But I do not know either. Slaves are not given religious education here."

"We Spaniards have but one God," Cortez said to her, "an all-powerful one who loves Spaniard and Aztec alike, but who insists that all follow His true light, and turn from the evil gods of the Aztecs and other demons of the Devil. Do you understand?"

"I think so, General," Marina said.

"Can you find it in your heart, Dona Marina, to accept our one God as the true Deity, and join us in our holy cause to drive the wicked gods out of Anahuac?"

Marina was breathless with anxiety suddenly, as Cortez' dark eyes seemed to burn into her very soul. She had long regarded many of the Aztec gods as evil, and it was not such a great step from that to the acceptance of a Spanish god who might well be the embodiment of her good Mayan ones.

"I have had few loyalties," she admitted aloud, "to kings or to gods. I have had little reason for any, until now. If your god can give me back my self-respect and dignity, General, I will follow him and you gladly."

Cortez was smiling again. He turned to the priest behind him. "The holy water, father."

The priest came and took a small vial and sprinkled some water from it onto her head. She gasped slightly in fear, feeling the cool wetness on her scalp. The priest said some words over her in a language she did not recognize, and made a motion over his heart that she had come to recognize as a sign of fealty to the Spanish god.

"Now," Cortez said when it was over, "you are a baptized Christian, and your Christian name is official. Henceforth you are Lady Marina, a crusader in the righteous work of the Lord."

"I thank you, General," Marina said breathlessly. "I will learn the ways of your religion, and I will hope

they show me the paths to Truth and Wisdom."

"Well said, Marina," Cortez smiled. "You are now my official interpreter for this expedition." He turned to Aguilar. "She will do no menial work. When we are encamped ashore, she will be given quarters with the few Spanish women we brought from Cuba, and she will be treated as one of them."

"Yes, General," Aguilar replied.

"You may go get your things below deck now," Cortez said to her, "and place yourself under Aguilar's personal supervision for debarkation."

"Yes, General," Marina said quietly.

Cortez turned then and resumed his business of preparing for the landing of his troops and equipment. Marina was returned to the hold by a soldier under Aguilar's orders, and so many things were whirling through her head that she felt dizzy with it all. When she was below deck again, the soldier who brought her there left her to go to another part of the hold, while she got her few belongings together, and suddenly she was surrounded by the people who had made the grim voyage with her. One of the men had climbed to the hatchway and had seen her with Cortez and Tendile, and later had observed the priest baptize her. Now that hard-looking fellow and all the others gathered around her.

"We were given to Cortez as menials!" the hard-looking man accused Marina angrily. "Not as soldiers or advisors in his arrogant invasion of Anahuac! You stood by his side and issued warnings of war to the Aztecs, who are our brothers!"

"I merely conveyed the general's thoughts to the Aztecs in their own language," Marina said softly.

Now the young man who had tried to seduce Marina in the night pushed forward nearer her. He

was a muscular fellow wearing only a loin-cloth and sandals. "*You denied your gods!*" he hurled at her. "You let the Spanish priest work his magic over you! We saw it all! You turned away from your gods just to win the favor of the Spaniards!"

Marina stooped to pick up a small bundle of clothing, where she had left it, then faced him. "Unlike the rest of you, who were merely trouble-makers and misfits among the Tabascans, I was an owned object, like a dog. The gods of Tabasco never smiled on me. I've been used and abused by Tabascans and their gods since early childhood. I have had enough of it. Now I will see if it is better to be a Christian. I strongly suspect it is."

"Infidel!" someone hissed at her.

"Traitor!"

They backed her into a corner, and Marina became suddenly frightened.

"You could never trust a Malinche!" a woman growled.

The stocky, stringy-haired fellow who had boldly climbed to the hatchway to observe the goings-on above them now closed in on Marina, and she could smell the rancid odor of him.

"You will call the soldier, and tell him that you made a mistake before. You will say that you must renounce the Spanish god, to keep your honor, and that you will stay and work with us at our menial tasks."

The young man who had tried to make love to her came up beside the husky one. "Do it now!" he said harshly.

Marina's pulse thundered in her ears, but her new anger overpowered any feeling of fear. "I will not!" she said defiantly.

There was a brief, heavy silence among them, then

a young woman gritted out a short comment between her teeth. "It is her knowledge of their tongue. It has corrupted her completely with its dark magic. She is beyond help."

"The gods will be very disturbed," an elderly man commented, at the rear of the group.

"They will punish us," said the old woman who had sat beside Marina earlier, "if we do not abort this blasphemy. Not just the Malinche."

There was another short silence, then the husky fellow standing directly before Marina reached behind him, and took something that was passed to him. He brought it around and showed it to Marina, and it was a sharp stone knife, the kind used by priests for sacrificial rites.

Marina gasped sharply when she saw it. She had not thought they would have the courage to go so far, on the galleon.

"Remove her Tabascan robe from her," the husky fellow now said in his throat, his face heavy-lined. "She dishonors it."

Suddenly the young man beside him, and a middle-aged Tabascan, grabbed Marina's arms. The young one took hold of her dress at the neck, and pulled violently downward, and it ripped off her shoulders, exposing her full breasts. He tore it downward again, and the cloth fell from her hips and thighs, leaving her nude. The men just stood and stared at her naked beauty for a moment. But then the husky one moved closer with the knife.

"Now, Malinche," he breathed heavily. "The Tabascan gods will take their vengeance on you, through us." He placed the tip of the knife between her breasts, just below the breastbone. One powerful

stroke, carefully done, would open her up from there to her groin, and the evil inside her would come spilling out into the Spanish ship, where it belonged.

"Go ahead!" an old woman croaked out nervously.

But just at that moment, the Spanish soldier returned from the forward part of the hold, past the excitedly whickering horses and the stacks of equipment, and came up behind them, wide-eyed.

"Hey!" he yelled out, when he saw what was happening. He dropped a wooden crate he had been carrying, and quickly drew the sword from its scabbard.

Those between the husky Tabascan and him quickly stumbled away from him and his weapon. He was a square-built fellow about the size of Cortez, but with a dark beard. His name was Jamarillo and he had joined Cortez' cavalry at the last moment in Havana. Now he brandished his weapon ominously as the husky Tabascan and the young one turned toward him.

"What kind of Devil's work are you up to there! Stand away from that girl!" the soldier Jamarillo said loudly.

The young Tabascan hesitated, then stepped away from Marina. The husky one made a sound in his throat, then turned back to her with the knife, preparatory to plunging it into her chest.

There was only a split-second in which to act, and Jamarillo did. He lunged forward like an acrobat, his iron armor clanking as he moved, and thrust the sword into the Tabascan's back. The sharp blade cut through the Tabascan's insides swiftly, rupturing and tearing as it went, glanced off a frontal rib and

came protruding through his chest just below the heart, covered with blood.

Marina stared at the bloody blade, and the look of shock on the Tabascan's face, and then that moment in her eternity was gone, and Jamarillo drew the weapon from the Tabascan's body. The husky Tabascan grabbed at his back, his eyes bulging, and then fell at Marina's feet, bloody and twisted. His right leg jerked once, and he was dead.

The soldier Jamarillo now turned to the young Tabascan, and raised his bloody sword again, with an oath.

"No!" Marina said loudly. She reached down and grabbed her torn dress and held it up against her nakedness.

Jamarillo paused, and looked toward her. "We Christians," Marina said to him deliberately, "are merciful, are we not, in emulation of our God?"

Jamarillo lowered the sword. "He wanted your death as much as the other man."

"I am safe now," she said. "There is no need."

Jamarillo regarded her curiously, then slowly returned his sword to its scabbard. He then picked up a blanket that lay on the floor of the hold, and threw it over Marina's shoulders. She pulled it tight around her.

"We will be watching you," Jamarillo said to the young man. Then he put his hand on Marina's shoulder. "Come, Aguilar will have clothing for you. You are one of us now."

Marina nodded, and followed him through the ring of somber Indian faces. Looking at them, she realized with some trepidation that she had made a final choice. She had allied herself with the white-

skinned invaders of her land, against the people of Anahuac who would surely oppose them.

She could only hope that she had made the right decision.

Chapter Two

The column of cavalry moved boldly down the dirt road that entered the Totonac Indian town, the horses snorting and whinnying with excitement, the armor of the cavaliers clanking as they rode forward. On either side of the road were massed hundreds of Totonacs, clad in tribal robes and carrying garlands of blossoms to welcome the strange pale-skinned visitors. They stared in wonderment at the horses, and not without some fear, and the slightest turn of a mount from the road, even temporarily, would cause a small panic among the awe-stricken bystanders.

Directly behind the cavalry came Cortez' cannons, a half-dozen in number, drawn by sturdy, armor-plated infantry soldiers, and then came the infantry itself, marching four abreast, noisy in its armor, bristling with muskets, crossbows and lances. At the far end of that long line, at the rear of the marching column, were carts and vans with ammunition, food, equipment, and women and servants.

Cortez and several of his captains rode before the cavalry, ramrod-straight in their saddles, the visors on their helmets up so the Indians could see their faces. Cortez himself rode a white Arabian stallion that inspired such wonder in the locals that some

thought it to be a lesser, auxiliary god, while others whispered that the horses and riders must be one deity-like creature. They had never seen horses before, nor firearms, nor armor of metal, and the reports from Tabasco concerning the power of these awesome weapons had convinced most caciques of Totonac towns that it was prudent to welcome the Spaniards with open arms, rather than risk the death and destruction already visited upon the Tabascans.

Shortly after the Aztec embassy had left the Spaniards, therefore, and while the latter were still getting encamped properly on the high ground behind the harbor at their landfall site, the Cempoallan cacique, or mayoral lord, had sent his own emissaries to Cortez, saying that the Spaniards were welcome in Totonac territory, and inviting them to Cempoalla, a kind of regional capital that lay under Aztec domination and that paid tribute to Montezuma, but whose citizens hated and feared the Aztecs.

Cortez had acted immediately on this invitation, sensing the possibility of a military alliance that could be of much greater importance to him than the victory on the battlefield at Tabasco. Within a week and a half of landing, he had started his march to Cempoalla, and now he was there.

As the army moved into the stucco-walled town, Cortez and his officers were impressed with what they saw. Houses, buildings and temples stood glistening in the sun, coated with a hard white-wash. Gardens and small parks were everywhere, and the people were generally well-dressed. The women wore either full dresses—fine cotton garments with designs woven into them—that left their bosoms bare, and the men were clothed in a loin-cloth or

sash, with a cotton mantle sometimes worn over the shoulders. The better-off wore jewelry and ornaments of gold, silver, and semi-precious stones. These ornaments caught the eyes of the soldiery as they marched into the heart of the town, over five hundred strong with their weapons and armor, and their dreams of New World wealth seemed realized.

Soon Cortez' cavalry—about a tenth of his entire force—entered a central square with trees and flowers along its perimeter, and the Totonac cacique was there to greet Cortez, with a plumed entourage. There was an elevated stone platform near a pyramidal temple, and the cacique waited for Cortez on the platform. There were thousands of noisy citizens in the square, who fell away from the platform and temple as the mounted cavalry ringed the square. A hush then descended as Cortez dismounted and climbed a few steps to the platform with his officers. Cortez embraced the cacique in the Spanish way, the gesture was returned, and the throng around them reacted loudly, throwing garlands up onto the platform.

Standing there on that sunny platform, Cortez realized, listening to the shouting crowd around him, that he had taken a sizeable step forward in his mainland venture. In marching inland to Cempoalla, after the rejection of his overtures by the Aztecs, he was serving notice on them unequivocally that he was in Mexico to stay. Now he hoped to build an alliance that would give him the strength to establish the sovereignty of Spain over this entire heathen land, despite his disputed authority under the crown by the governor of Cuba, and to convert these followers of the Devil, these practitioners of human sacrifice, cannibalism and sodomy, to the True Faith.

Cortez turned now to his captain called Diaz, a cavalry officer of high calibre. "Where is the girl? Where is Dona Marina?"

"She arrives now in the van," Diaz said, pointing toward the covered horse-drawn cart that now came into the square, bearing Marina and the several Spanish women who had prevailed on the general to be allowed to accompany their lovers and husbands on this expedition.

The van drew to a halt near the platform, as citizenry and cavalry made way for it, and then Marina debarked from it and came up onto the platform under a cavalry guard. She was now dressed in a dark dress in the Spanish style, blue in color with a small amount of dark green in it, and a lace bodice and sleeves. She stood beside Cortez looking like a bronze-skinned Spanish lady, and her beauty caused a second hush to come over the crowd. Cortez had not seen her in her new attire, and was impressed. He greeted her with a proud smile, then introduced her to the heavy-set, rather tall cacique who stood supported by two servants, in the Anahuac custom for nobility and royalty. The cacique was very surprised to see an Indian girl in Cortez' close retinue, but when they exchanged their words of greeting, he spoke to her in the same respectful tone that he had used with Cortez himself.

Cortez turned to Marina. "You will again interpret what is said between us, Dona Marina," he said quietly to her. "And this time you will give full import to the strength of my words, since that strength will be important to us here. Do you understand?"

"Whatever is your wish, my general," she said to him.

Now the square was completely silent, except for

the occasional snorting of a Spanish horse around its perimeter. Cavaliers, mounted and standing, ringed the square, and the main expanse of it was filled with Totonacs. The streets leading into it were crowded now with Cortez' foot soldiers and his carts and wagons, and a cannon had been pulled into the square, where three soldiers manned it.

"We come here in peace, Cacique, from a great king across the sea, who wishes you well. We have been sent here to drive the evil gods from your midst, and abolish the inhuman Aztec practices, and introduce the knowledge of the true God of the Spaniard," Cortez said.

Marina hesitated, then translated. The assembled crowd listened in stunned silence. When she was finished, the cacique studied Marina's face for a long moment before he responded.

"The Aztec makes his gods ours, Malinche," the cacique said solemnly, addressing Marina and Cortez as one. "Most of them have served us well. Also, any interference with them would bring the wrath of the great emperor Montezuma on us."

Cortez listened to Marina's translation, then responded very firmly, despite the grim faces in the square. "I understand, Cacique. But the Aztec gods are evil, and the Aztecs emulate their evil ways. They exact heavy taxes from your people, and they take your young men and women to sacrifice to their bloodthirsty deities, is it not true?"

After the translation, the cacique responded quickly, and somewhat nervously. "These things are true. And your great victory at Tabasco causes us to marvel at your god-like power, Malinche. But a defiance of the great Montezuma can bring nothing but sorrow and death to our people. His armies will

sweep out of the plains like a summer storm, if we oppose him, carrying all before them!"

Cortez waited through Marina's translation calmly, nodding his understanding of her broken Spanish. Then he drew his sword from his long scabbard, dramatically. The face of the cacique revealed an immediate fear, and there were gasps and mutterings from the crowd. Cortez turned from the cacique, though, and shouted to his men at the cannon, brandishing the sword in the air.

"Prepare the artillery!" he yelled out.

Marina and the massed Totonacs watched tensely as the soldiers loaded a ball into the big gun and prepared a breech fuse. In moments, they were ready.

"Now," Cortez said loudly. "Aim at the tower atop the temple!"

Marina turned to Cortez fearfully. "General, please. Let me beg you to reconsider! The tower is very important to the Totonac religion!"

A priest of Cortez came over to him, the one who had baptized Marina aboard ship. "Then it is all the more important to destroy it and its symbolism!" he argued curtly.

The officers around Cortez remained silent, except for Diaz. He came now to Cortez and spoke confidentially to him. "General, the girl Marina knows their disposition. Perhaps a less controversial target should be chosen, to display the royal might?"

Cortez stood there a moment, and looked from Diaz to Marina. At last, he said, "Very well. One target is as good as another." He turned to the men at the cannon. "Target correction. There is an abandoned house on the far side of the square, the one with the falling-in roof. Destroy it!"

One of the men at the cannon yelled out orders, the cannon was aimed, and the fuse lighted. A moment later the big gun exploded like a clap of thunder in the quiet square, and a cannon ball whistled over the heads of the crowd. On the far side of the square, the abandoned building shattered loudly, and masonry went flying, sending up a great cloud of dust and debris into the air.

For a moment there was sheer chaos in the square. Men, women and children ran in all directions, to escape from the roaring machine and its long-distance destruction. Several people fell and were trampled on, and there was a lot of screaming by women. The cavaliers at the perimeter of the square had a difficult time keeping their mounts under control, as the animals sensed the tension and fear in those around them. But finally the scrambling stopped, and people stopped running, and began to edge back into the square.

The cacique stood near Cortez numb with sudden fear. The men who formally supported his arms had almost bolted when the cannon went off, but now stood their ground with him, eyes big. Cortez glanced at Marina, who had clapped her hands over her ears. Her face was expressionless. She had seen what firearms could do, at Tabasco. Cortez turned to the cacique.

"This is the kind of weapons we have to use against the Aztecs," he said somberly. "If they come to attack us and our allies, they will be destroyed by the thundering guns. If they resist our righteous might, they will be crushed. So will all allies of the Aztecs who do not join us to rise up against them, Cacique. Only those who follow us and support us against the Aztecs will be spared." He turned to

Marina, "Tell him that, girl. In those exact words."

Marina nodded slightly, feeling suddenly faint. She repeated Cortez' words in Nahuatl, going slowly, attempting to make it as inoffensive as possible by the tone of her voice. When she was finished, the square was quiet again, and the cacique just stood there, wondering about the wisdom of inviting these invaders into his town. Finally, he replied.

"Your great power is manifest, Malinche." He could not distinguish between Marina and Cortez, in addressing them. "As you can see, we tremble before it. We will be your allies against the Aztecs."

There were a few cheers throughout the square, in response to this, and then they grew greater in volume.

"We have always despised their domination and their arrogance over us," the cacique continued, gaining confidence in his position from the popular support. "Now we will free ourselves from their tyranny with the leadership of the great army of the Spaniard."

Now there was more yelling from the crowd, which had recovered from the cannon's terrifying roar and eagerly hoped for a friendship with its powerful and awesome owners. Marina knew, though, that the reaction would have been very different if the weapon had destroyed part of their place of worship.

When she had finished translating for Cortez, he was very pleased. He clasped the shoulders of the cacique again, and told him that they would meet later in private, to discuss the visiting of other Totonac towns in the next few days, with a view toward recruiting an Indian army from them before

Cortez moved on inland. Marina conveyed this all to the cacique, and he made no objection, and shortly thereafter Cortez and his officers were escorted to a villa compound nearby, for their billets.

Cortez was exuberant at the villa, realizing he had made a big step forward in his New World campaign, and in his secret dream to rule all this part of America, under the crown of Spain.

But, at the end of that eventful day, discontent seethed in the ranks. His officers, and especially his rank-and-file soldiers, had been disappointed by the meeting. The Aztecs had offered gold and silver in quantity, but these Totonacs made few gifts to the invaders, and those of mediocre quality. Silver was scarce in Cempoalla, and gold almost non-existent. It was becoming clear to these adventurers that the only way they would acquire the riches that Cortez had promised them in Cuba would be to conquer the Aztecs—with five hundred men and a few cannon—and to many of them, that notion seemed more suicidal than adventuresome.

The soldiery was encamped that evening in the streets and gardens surrounding the villa where Cortez and his officers were billeted, and there was little celebration, as there had been at Tabasco. Word of the grumblings came to Cortez at mid-evening, and in his elated mood, it surprised and disappointed him. He was still mulling it all over when his officers and Marina arrived at the villa room he had chosen as his office for a briefing before Cortez' evening meeting with the cacique.

Cortez sat in deep thought at a long table when Diaz, Alvarado, Aguilar, Marina and a couple of other officers arrived. The officers greeted him cheerfully, but noticed his pensive mood. Marina

was the only woman in the room, and was given a chair near Cortez' desk-table. Servants had set braziers around the room that now flickered in their dim light. Pallets with cotton pillows were placed around the perimeter of the room, but the captains stood or sat on stools they had brought. After the amenities, Cortez glanced up at them.

"There are eight sizeable Totonac towns in this region," he began. "Our goal, over the next week or so, will be to visit some of them and unite them in our cause. I want the Christian cross atop every temple in this area, and to start training people who will be able to teach the Christian faith. Whatever authority we have from the crown rests on these responsibilities. We have enemies in Cuba who are even now in Madrid, trying to undermine our authority in this expedition."

"Hear, hear," Alvarado said. He was a handsome, blonde young man who had hard, blue eyes and a strong chin. He was a hothead, but an excellent soldier. He had come to the shores of Mexico, or Anahuac, for the military adventure, and for gold. He had little interest in religion, but understood clearly the necessity of proceeding under a cloak of righteousness, not only for the Church, but for world opinion.

"Governor Velasquez cannot support the expedition because we won't allow him to control it," Diaz said seriously. He was older than Cortez by ten years, about forty, and an experienced soldier. He was Cortez' senior officer and advisor, and a steadying influence on the impulsive Cortez. He wore only a partial beard and it had gray in it. His soft, intelligent eyes belied his fury on the battlefield. Like the others in the room, he now wore his armor

again, holding his helmet at his side. The Spaniards never met officially with the Indians without wearing the symbol of their military might, which was their iron body-plating.

Cortez nodded. "He will continue to undermine the expedition behind our backs, in our absence from Cuba. But when King Charles receives our shipment of Aztec gold and silver that is already on its way to him, he will be impressed with the economic soundness of the venture. When we are able to report the conversion of the Totonacs to Christianity, we will have given him a moral justification for the enterprise that is unarguable."

The slim Aguilar leaned forward on his stool. "Exactly, General." Aguilar had not come with them from Cuba. He had been living in a small village on the coast, trading with the Indians, and had joined the expedition just before the battle at Tabasco. He knew a little Nahuatl, but not enough to communicate adequately for interpretation. He had been helping a woman named Dona Isabel to teach Marina more Spanish.

"It is necessary, therefore," Cortez continued, "that we move forward with our conversion program as soon as it is feasible, and that the caciques understand our goals. I intend to take this up with our local cacique tonight, and also the matter of helping us raise an army of Indians to bolster our ranks. Our immediate goal should be the recruitment of ten thousand native warriors. Is there any disagreement?"

"We should try for at least that many, General," Alvarado said.

The other officers present, Sandoval and Ordaz, muttered their agreement. Diaz turned to Marina,

who had sat silently through the discussion.

"Maybe we should hear from the Dona Marina," he suggested.

Cortez turned to her, as did the others in the room. "A good idea, Diaz. Who among us knows the mind of the Indian better? Do you have any recommendations, Marina, that might help us?"

Marina smiled uncertainly. "It would be presumptuous, my general."

Cortez shook his head. "Not at all. Please."

Marina took in a deep breath, and all the men present marveled at the curves under the dark bodice. "Well, General, there is one thing. There is perhaps less need for religious conversion to the true faith presently than for military alliance. The speedy building of your army must have greatest importance at this time. If you press the cacique on the religious question, is it not possible that you will lose your chance to make a strong military partnership?"

Her Spanish had been faltering, and her choice of words not exact in every instance, but they had carried an impact that caused a long silence in the room before anyone spoke. Bernal Diaz and Cortez regarded Marina intently, re-evaluating their opinions of her.

Finally, Diaz spoke. "Marina has a valid point, General."

Alvarado, though, objected. "Surely we can have both, gentlemen—religious conversion *and* military recruitment. The Totonacs are in no position to say nay. And it is very important to assert our power over them while we have it, is it not? A deviation from our announced religious goals may be taken as a sign of weakness."

Cortez drummed his fingers on the polished

helmet before him on the table, and his reddish-blond beard glinted in the flickering light. "True, Alvarado, true." He turned to regard Marina seriously. "Would you have me abandon our holy crusade temporarily then, my Malin dona?" he said to her.

Dona Marina had given her new religion much thought since her baptism aboard the flagship, and it seemed a simpler and truer one than that she had been raised with. Also, it had given her more dignity than she had ever known before. "No, General, not abandon it. But neither should you allow it to destroy what you have gained."

There was an even heavier silence in the room, and then Pedro Alvarado spoke again, muttering. "It would seem that the newly-converted Malin does not have the same concern for the word of God that we Spaniards do."

Bernal Diaz turned to Alvarado darkly. "What the girl says is true. We can lose everything by pressing the religious issue too quickly and too hard. And unfair accusations by you, Captain, avail us nothing."

The two scowled at each other for a moment, and Marina's cheeks blazed in embarrassment. "I pray to Jesus and Mary every night," she said quietly, "and hope to become a good Christian."

"Of course you do," Diaz said quietly.

Cortez rose. "Alvarado, Marina wants only what is best for this expedition, just as we do. And she has made an important point. I will not speak of their temples tonight, but only of alliance. And we will not immediately destroy their places of worship. We will be content to place a cross in each temple, alongside their idols, as a beginning, and to halt sacrifices of all

kinds. We will destroy their gods later, after we have had an opportunity to persuade them of the real truth and the true light."

"An excellent decision, General," Diaz commented.

"Yes, excellent," Aguilar agreed.

Alvarado grunted. "Perhaps it is a reasonable compromise, under the circumstances," he admitted.

Cortez nodded. "Good. And now, there is one other thing, before we leave for the cacique's house. There is grumbling among the men tonight, I hear. They wanted gold, and so far their pockets are empty. Some are talking of returning to Cuba—taking one of our ships back."

Diaz made a sound in his throat. "If enough of them wanted to go, I don't know how we could stop them."

"There is one way to stop talk of desertion," Alvarado said loudly. "Court-martial the men responsible, and hang them to the nearest tree!"

The captain called Ordaz nodded. "It must be dealt with severely, or it will spread like a disease through the ranks. I have heard the talk, this afternoon and this evening. It is by a few men, but they are very vocal."

"The Totonacs won't ally themselves with a divided, uncertain army," Aguilar said heavily. "Perhaps a rallying speech by the general would be effective."

Cortez shook his head. "They have heard speeches before. Now they want promises fulfilled, and I can't fulfill them immediately." He picked his helmet up from the table. "But something must be done, before it all gets out of hand. I'll think about it

tonight." He turned and placed his hand on Marina's shoulder. "Now let's convince the Totonacs that their future lies with us, rather than with the Aztecs."

Marina felt the strong hand on her, and suddenly she was all fluttery inside. Whenever Cortez spoke to her, or touched her, she experienced this disturbing emotion inside, and it was a little frightening to her. She rose, as did the other officers in the room, and Diaz replied to Cortez' comment.

"As our cause is just, so shall our enterprise succeed," he said quietly.

The second meeting with the Totonac cacique went well, with Marina's help. He and his council of elders agreed to recruit an Indian army for Cortez, and to allow the Christian cross to share space with their gods in their temples. It was an enormous accomplishment, and Marina was as much responsible for it as any of the *conquistadores*. Part way through the meeting, Cortez began touching her affectionately, smiling at her when she smoothed away the rough edges of communication, causing the fluttery feeling to spread inside her like a fire out of control. When the meeting was over and they all returned to the Spanish quarters under armed guard, Cortez stopped Marina as she was about to depart to the billets for the unmarried Spanish women. They were alone in a corridor of the villa, near Cortez' sleeping quarters.

"This alliance with the Totonacs," he said to her in the dim light of the corridor. "I could not have effected it without your help, Marina. Your judgment in the matter was excellent. Your royal Malin blood speaks clearly to us."

Marina blushed slightly. "I am pleased to be able

to help the general in any way I can," she said softly.

"You have become more than an interpreter tonight," Cortez went on. "Your counsel has become very important to me. If you were Spanish, and a man, I would give you a commission."

"I want only your respect and affection, General," she replied.

Cortez touched her cheek with his hand, and her face flushed under the light caress. "You have both," he said quietly to her. He stroked her cheek, and needles of excitement prickled down her neck and back. "You are a beautiful girl, Marina. Your beauty touches me."

"Thank you, General," she whispered.

"The Dona Isabel confides to me that you did not have a man in Tabasco, and that you have never been in love."

Marina shrugged. "When I was a young girl, I was sold to a Tabascan trader by my princess mother, so that the male child of her second marriage would inherit title to the Malin monarchy without competition from me."

"I have heard the story from Aguilar," Cortez said.

"The trader molested me, but not cruelly," she went on, in a low voice. "Then I became the property of a lesser lord in Tabasco. He had several wives, but by the time I was fifteen, he was taking me to his bed. As a servant, I had no rights, and no one to complain to. After a short time, though, I was traded off to an older man, who had no appetite for women. But as a Malin, I was never allowed to forget that I was an outsider, and as a bond servant, I was treated more like a beast of burden than a human being. I was beaten regularly for no reason. Less than a year ago,

I was promised to the Aztecs as a slave, or possibly for sacrifice to their gods at one of their annual festivals. But there was a mix-up and I was not taken."

"Good Lord!" Cortez muttered.

"When I was given to you Spaniards by the Tabascan king, I feared that I would die at your hands," she admitted to him. "I am grateful for my gentle treatment, and for the opportunity to embrace your god as my own."

Cortez put his hands on her waist, and then he was moving them up onto her breasts. Slowly they found the contours of the soft mounds under the cloth of her dress, and cupped them in his firm grasp. She did not flinch or move, but she found that she was breathing more shallowly.

"Will you come to my room, little bird?" he asked her quietly. "You are a child of Christ now, you have a choice. But it would please me very much."

Marina suddenly felt very faint. She had never experienced such powerful physical attraction, nor such fear. Cortez was still god-like to her, and she could not imagine her boldness in wanting him so desperately. But she did, and she could not control it. She felt herself tremble slightly inside, as she replied.

"Yes, my general," she whispered.

It was just a few steps down the corridor to the privacy of Cortez' sleeping quarters. In a moment they were there, the cotton curtain was drawn across the doorway, and they were alone. There were two large candles on a shelf, illuminating the white-washed room with their soft glow. Along one wall was a large pallet-bed, with cotton covers and plush

pillows, and the wall opposite bore a mural depicting a Totonac hunt. There were urns and pots placed around the room in which tropical plants grew, and a woven pandanus mat on the floor. A window opened onto a scented garden.

Cortez unstrapped his breastplate and removed it, and then his leg armor, setting it all in a pile in a corner. Underneath it he wore a knitted shirt and pants and a strong leather belt. Marina had never seen him without his armor before. He pulled the shirt off over his head, and turned to her as he dropped it onto the bed. He was fair-skinned and muscular, and his beard and hair shone golden in the light from the candles, and he looked even more like a god to her than before. Her mouth was suddenly dry, and her pulse was pounding in her ears. He came over to her, and embraced her.

"You smell so good," he murmured into her ear. He pressed his lips to her neck, and a little chill danced down her back. She returned his embrace, and his lips found her mouth, and pressed it hungrily.

When the kiss was over, she was breathless. The Indians used the lip-touching too, but not with such passion.

"A general has physical desires, too," he said to her, as he fumbled with the fastenings on the dark dress. "I felt such a desire for you when I first saw you, on board ship. It has not lessened since then."

He reached inside the open bodice, and she felt his hand on her warm flesh there, as it now caressed her breast carefully.

"I must confess—that I feel a strong urgency—that must be much the same, when I am close to the

general," she managed in her breathless and broken Spanish. "Is there no shame—attached to it, my beautiful lord?"

"None whatever, my dear Marina," he said huskily to her.

He drew the bodice of the dress down, exposing Marina's entire torso to view, and stood there staring for a long moment. Then Marina was taking the dress down over her hips, and dropping it to the floor. Unlike her Spanish counterparts, she wore no underclothing, and now stood naked before him. Cortez let his eyes travel over her full breasts, narrow waist, and flare of bronze hips. He had never been intimate with a Spanish woman who was quite so sculpturally perfect.

In moments he, too, was nude, and somehow they were on the low bed together, with Cortez' strong hands moving on Marina's soft, hot flesh, and his manhood throbbing hard against her silky thigh. His mouth caressed her belly, and then her breasts, and Marina felt an inferno building inside her such as she had never experienced before. It was as if she were going to explode somewhere inside before they could unite in the hot place, and find fulfillment in each other. But then he mounted her, and her thighs received him, and there was a hard, brutal union that made her gasp with violent pleasure. Marina felt him fill her savagely, until she thought there would be too much, and then there was the power of him moving in her, the wild probing and thrusting, and her knees came up to allow his deepest penetration, and her nails raked across his knotted back. Several high-pitched, throaty cries pierced the room, and they had come from her throat. Finally, when his ravishing of

her was at its peak, and he was plunging without control into the deepest part of her, they reached a mutual climax of unleashed passion, a back-arching, nerve-trembling, gasping crescendo.

A long time afterwards, with the scent of their love-making still hanging heavy around them on the pallet, he moved away from her, and lay in complete exhaustion on the bed. Marina lay on her back beside him, just as he had left her, and savored fully her first truly satisfying experience of sex. She had thought that her awe of him and what he was might spoil it for her, but she had been able to accept the intimacy without reservation. She felt a complete woman now, for the first time in her life, and he had made it happen. It seemed that the Christian god was taking care of her already. Now she knew what it was like to be in love with a man. She had given her heart and soul, on that pallet in that candle-lit room, to Cortez.

She turned to him in the semi-darkness. "I am yours, General. I am your woman now, for whatever purpose you need me."

Cortez did not hear her at first. He was lying motionless, staring at the dark ceiling, his mind already on other things—things that would always be more important to him than any one woman. He turned to her. "Hmm?" he said absently, his eyes not focusing on her.

"I said, I am your woman," Marina whispered softly to him.

Cortez smiled briefly. "Yes, Marina. My Malinche sparrow, my Indian love. Of course you are."

But he turned back then to the darkness above him. He was already formulating a bold plan for

unity among his men that had no real parallel in military history, and would, if successful, represent a point of no return in his conquest of Mexico.

And the conquest had become, to Cortez, everything.

Chapter Three

The following morning, Cortez decided to take care of first matters first. In the middle of the night, after Marina had left his room, he had sent a handful of trusted officers and soldiers back to San Juan de Ulua, where his small fleet was anchored, with very unusual orders. Now he called his entire army together in the courtyard and street outside the officers' quarters to announce to them what those orders had been.

It was a beautiful, cool morning. Cortez mounted a wall of the courtyard, where he could be seen from the villa and the street, and Diaz and a few other officers stood just below him on either side of the wall. A hazy sunlight fell on his bare head, and the scent of garden blossoms filled the morning air. He wore only his knitted tunic-and-pants uniform, and sandals, and he carried no weapon. The Totonacs who gathered in the street at the fringes of the Spanish soldiers had never seen him without his armor, and their curiosity was strong. His troops, on the other hand, were sullen and morose on that morning, with many of them still talking seriously about returning to the fleet on their own. They had not gotten a share of the Aztec treasure at the harbor, and now, here at Cempoalla, where they had

expected to be dividing up gold and silver in quantity, they were still empty-handed. In Cuba, Cortez had promised them riches in Mexico. But all they had gotten so far was hardship, risk of life and limb, and more promises.

Dona Marina stood watching Cortez from a doorway of the villa as he waited for quiet among his troops. When she had returned to the quarters of the Spanish women on the previous night, Dona Isabel had guessed immediately what had happened, and Marina had admitted it to her, shyly but proudly, and now all the women knew that Marina had shared the general's bed. Several seemed jealous, but the rest, including Dona Isabel, were excited and pleased that this Indian maiden had so captured the attention of the general.

Cortez now raised his hand for complete silence. Looking over the grim faces of some of his men, he began.

"Last night," he said loudly, his deep voice carrying out over the street and the courtyard, *"I sent a small company of your comrades back to San Juan de Ulua."*

There was some muttering, and exclamations of surprise, from the armored throng. Beside him at the wall, the officers who had been at the briefing with Marina prior to the second interview with the local cacique knew what Cortez was about to say, but they had kept it a strict secret through the night.

"The purpose of their mission," Cortez went on grimly, *"was to scuttle our fleet."*

Suddenly there was an uproar of shock and indignation throughout the troops. Even loyal cavaliers stationed around Cortez at the wall looked up at him with disbelief on their faces. Officers who

had not known stared numbly toward him, digesting the import of the information. Marina knew with sudden insight that this was the thing Cortez had been concocting in bed last night, after their love-making, when he had been so preoccupied. Her brow furrowed as she tried to grasp the meaning of it, and the exclamations of incredulity came to her ears from the Spanish women near her.

The soldiers in the street were much more vocal, though.

"The fleet!"

"This is insanity!"

"What right does he have?"

"It must be he is jesting!"

Cortez held his hand up again, for silence. *"By this time, I expect that my fast-moving detachment has completed its journey, and that my orders are even now being carried out in their entirety."*

There was another outburst of noise from the troops.

"How can we get home without our ships?"

"We will be isolated here in this wilderness!"

"This is an outrage!"

But Cortez went on, unruffled. *"There has been talk among you of abandoning the expedition. After our great victory at Tabasco, and our friendly reception from potential allies here, this seems incredibly short-sighted and selfish to me. I could not stop your desertion of our cause with force, those of you who may have lost faith in it, but I can prevent your seizing my own ships to accomplish such cowardice."*

There was more chaos among the troops, and suddenly a foot soldier nearby shouted up at Cortez loudly, *"We are not cowards! You are a traitor to*

your promises! And now you make us captives here! This for treachery!"

Suddenly the fellow leapt forward, hefted a long Spanish lance to his shoulder, and aimed it at Cortez' chest, his face twisted with rage.

Bernal Diaz, near Cortez on the street, drew his sword from its scabbard, but there was no time to get to the soldier. Alvarado, the golden-haired, hot-headed captain of cavalry, had brought a cross-bow with him, though, and he now raised it and pulled its iron trigger in one motion. The metal arrow hissed through the air like a silver snake, hitting the soldier just beside the heart. It pierced his light armor, tore through his chest cavity, and exited through the upper portion of his back. There was a gasp from the crowd of hard-bitten infantrymen around him as his jaw fell open, he dropped the lance, clattering, to the ground, and grabbed at the end of the arrow convulsively. He fell against a nearby companion, and then hit the ground at his feet, his eyes still open in the rictus of death.

Cortez had not flinched or budged from his position atop the wall. He looked down on the soldier grimly for a moment, and then back out at the troops.

"How much better for him to have fallen in righteous battle!" he exclaimed loudly.

Marina had seen the whole thing, through the wide gateway in the low wall, and was very frightened. All the officers in the street and the courtyard had now drawn some kind of weapon, and were moving threateningly toward the loudest troops. Cortez now restrained them, and continued.

"This is not just a trek for gold!" he said to them. *"We must always remember that our primary*

purpose here is to drive the Devil from the hearts of this heathenry, and to establish the flag of our beloved homeland over all we survey!"

The assemblage had fallen silent again.

"If there are those of us whose only motivation is greed, let them desert if they will. For the rest of us, the temptation to return to the fleet that brought us here is gone. There is only one way for us to go now, and that is forward, to Tenochtitlan! The only way for those of us bold in heart and strong in resolve!"

There were a few shouts of scattered approval by the more loyal troops, but there was still mainly a numb silence. It was time for him to make his second stunning announcement.

"For those of you who remain loyal to our cause," Cortez went on, *"I am going to give you a choice of leadership, so that if you are not satisfied with the way the expedition has progressed, you may do something about it. I am resigning my generalship of this army."*

There were more mutterings of surprise. A few officers who had not been privy to this decision looked up at Cortez as if he had lost his mind. Diaz, Aguilar, Alvarado and a couple of others had been advised, and remained straight-faced. Marina gasped sharply as her understanding of the Spanish words made its impact on her.

"No!" somebody shouted from the street. *"You are our general! We want you!"*

"Don't listen to these traitors!" another brawny soldier yelled.

Cortez held his hand up once more. *"You will have this morning to consider the matter. You will discuss it among yourselves, and then you will advise your unit officer who you would like to lead you to*

Tenochtitlan. My suggestion is that you choose from among the ranks of officer, but the matter is in your hands. Thank you."

The speech, with its two startling announcements, was over. Cortez descended from the wall and walked solemnly through the courtyard to complete silence. Marina met him at the doorway, with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, my general!" she whispered.

He touched her face with his hand. "It will be all right," he told her. Then he passed on into the villa and his office quarters.

What Marina and the other women and the small army in the street did not know, though, on that sunny tropical morning, was that Cortez had no intention of giving up his leadership of this greatest of New World expeditions. After Marina had left him on the previous night, when he had gone to Diaz and other select officers and advised them of his decision to sink the fleet, he had also polled them on their loyalty to him, and had obtained their opinions regarding the loyalty of other officers, and he had found a bedrock of faith in his personal leadership. With these supporters going among the men this morning, denying their own nominations and exhorting Cortez' demonstrated abilities, the general knew he could not lose out in a popular vote. What he could gain, after his destruction of his own fleet, was a new solidarity and direction in the expedition that would drive it onward remorselessly toward Cortez' goals.

As it turned out, he was brilliantly right.

By noon that day, his troops, despite his unmitigated boldness in destroying their only means of escape from Mexico if fortune should go against

them, loudly demanded through their officers that Cortez resume his position as general of their intrepid army, and lead them to ultimate victory in Anahuac.

Cortez was quick to accept their generous offer, and the talk of desertion was over.

Halfway across the isthmus of Mexico, on that same bright tropical day, another important meeting was taking place. In the throne room of the Great Palace, the god-kind and emperor of all the nations of Anahuac, Montezuma II sat pensive on his royal throne. Around him in the ornately decorated and sumptuously furnished room were Lord Tendile, who had met with Cortez onboard his flagship at San Juan de Ulua; two lords who had accompanied Tendile on that important journey; Montezuma's first wife Netozá, who was the titular head of his harem of wives; a raven-haired, teen-age daughter of Montezuma called Linala; and a nephew named Guatemozin, second in line for the throne and a fiery, robust young warrior in the proud Aztec army.

The men stood around the throne, and the two women reclined on low pallets nearby. Netozá held a silver goblet of Indian wine in her bronze hand, and the daughter Linala fussed with her glossy, long hair. The women were garbed in long, flowing dresses tied at the waist with belts, and colored with designs of birds and flowers. Netozá's black hair was tied back with a ribbon of blue-dyed cotton, and she wore bracelets of gold on her right arm.

The men were all dressed in bulky cloths about their loins, and capes over their shoulders, with intricate designs woven into the cloth of the capes. Their long hair—about halfway to their shoulders—

was also held with a cloth band of varying colors around the forehead.

The room they occupied was large and spacious, open to a garden on one side, with walls of massive stones, a floor of beautiful tiles, and colorful tapestries on all sides. The scent of blossoms came from the garden.

"We all know the prophecy," Montezuma was saying to the others. He was a middle-aged man, slight of build, but with a handsome face. His dark eyes brooded now, as he sat there in his rich attire, ornamented with bracelets and a necklace of burnished gold. "When Quetzalcoatl left Anahuac, many cycles ago, he promised his return at just this time, to reclaim his kingdom. And he said that he would come out of the east."

Tendile nodded. "It is true, my lord. But I have looked upon this invader called Cortez, whom the people called Malinche because of his partnership with a Malin princess. He is flesh and blood, as we are, although clothed in metal. Those who follow him are quite unexceptional except for their pale skins, which are offensive to the nostrils."

Guatemozin strode before the throne, his young face clouded with anxiety. He was athletic-looking, his bronze muscles gleaming in the sunlight from the garden. His eyes were piercing, and his chin strong and masculine. "All this talk of Quetzalcoatl! This is nonsense of the old priests! When our god of gods returns, it will not be in the bleached skin of an earthling! He will descend from the clouds in all his glory, with hosts of gods and Aztec ancestors in attendance."

"The coastal people say Malinche's mountainous boats did come from the clouds," Montezuma

reminded his nephew. "And my priests warn that Quetzalcoatl may come in the flesh of man this time, to better communicate with us in our material world."

One of the two other lords present, both middle-aged men, turned from Montezuma to Tendile. "What man can bring down the thunder from the sky, as this Malinche does, to kill and wreak havoc? What man ever rode giant deer with foaming mouths and metal feet, or grew a beard on his face that is made of the sunlight itself?"

Tendile made a face and grunted, but Montezuma's soft eyes grew fearful at that description. The girl Linala listened with fascination, and secretly hoped that this Cortez might come to Tenochtitlan, so that she might look upon his godly beauty with her own eyes. Her mother Netoza sighed heavily.

"Flesh is flesh, my emperor, and gods are gods. You are descended from the great and holy Quetzalcoatl, but you are a man. So also is this flesh-and-blood creature from the sea. He tells Tendile that he comes from a king across the great waters, and he does not claim godhead for himself or that king."

"My priests say that the king he speaks of may be our high god, and this Cortez-Malinche a fleshly manifestation of him," Montezuma said quietly. "Or at the least, a holy emissary."

Tendile came closer to Montezuma, and leaned conspiratorially toward him. "He also speaks of destroying all subordinate gods. I have heard this from Cempoalla, where he organizes your enemies against you. Would the emissary of the great Quetzalcoatl suggest such blasphemy? Would he need to go to the lowly Totonacs for flesh-and-blood

support for his arrival in Anahuac?"

Guatemozin, his youthful face clouded with grim hostility, also moved closer to Montezuma. "Give me ten thousand proud Aztec warriors, and I will go to Cempoalla and bring back this invader's heart for Huitzilopotchli to feast on! Then you will see that this Cortez has no power except for his iron weapons!"

Montezuma regarded his hot headed nephew darkly. "There are rumors that the monsters on which Malinche's warriors ride are Malinche's dead enemies from Tabasco. Do you want to enter eternity in the form of such a creature, if you are wrong about him?"

Guatemozin raised his voice angrily. "Rumors and old wives' stories do not trouble me, Uncle! What concerns me is that the great Aztec nation does not humble itself before an invader from another world, because his skin is a different color!"

"Your nephew has a point, your majesty," Netoza said, sipping the drink that she held in her hand.

Montezuma took a deep breath in, and then let it out slowly. He had always been a firm believer in the Great Prophecy, and long before Cortez' arrival on their shores, there had been signs and omens, having to do with crops and the weather. Also, it was the end of the right fifty-two year cycle. It all fit together too nicely to be ignored.

"If this Malinche-Cortez advances toward our capital against my wishes," Montezuma said heavily, "he will be obliged to pass through Tlaxcala, which is loyal to our reign. You have my permission to send an embassy to them for the purpose of strengthening our feudal ties, and encouraging their resistance to the advance of the pale skins."

Guatemozin nodded. "It is a halfway measure, my lord, but it is a beginning."

"As for you, Tendile," Montezuma continued, "I want you to organize another embassy to the so-called Spaniards, and make a second plea to them at Cempoalla, to desist from their plan to march to Tenochtitlan. Indicate that our god Huitzilopotchli challenges the embassy of Cortez from Quetzalcoatl, and demands that the Spaniards quit his kingdom."

Tendile smiled with some satisfaction. "Yes, my lord."

"I am certain," Montezuma added uncertainly, "that Malinche will be diverted in his enterprise by the fear of Huitzilopotchli's wrath, and leave us in peace."

But everyone in the room heard the fear in his voice, in Montezuma's own throne room, as he made that hollow prediction. Nobody thought that Cortez would just go away, god-emissary or not, because threats were made to him.

That possibility did not seem to lie in their future.

In the following week, Cortez visited several Totonac towns and, with the Cempoallan cacique's help, recruited an Indian army of several thousands. They gathered slowly in Cempoalla, with their Aztec-type skin shields and bronze-tipped spears and knives. Cortez was able to outfit some of them with iron bucklers, the round war shields of the Spaniards, and a few lances, but most would have to rely on their traditional weaponry to supplement Cortez' muskets, pistols and cannons. As a matter of fact, much of Cortez' own infantry were equipped only with lances and swords, and no firearms, and those who did have guns knew that their ammuni-

tion would not last over a long campaign. So a time might come, they all knew, when they might be fighting Aztecs with little advantage in modern weaponry, and enormously outnumbered.

It was an unnerving thought to most of the Spanish soldiers, as they organized at Cempoalla with the new knowledge that there was now no fleet to escape on. If the Totonacs could be believed, the Aztec capital consisted of possibly a half-million inhabitants, with an army of a hundred thousand warriors in the immediate area, and many more in the outlying districts of the nation, in outpost garrisons. Against this kind of strength, Cortez proposed to take six hundred men—he had gained another hundred from San Juan de Ulua by sinking the fleet—a few cannon and several thousand doubtful Indian allies.

It had not escaped the attention of the Spaniards that the Aztecs did not always kill their enemies in battle. They always tried to capture some alive, to take back to Tenochtitlan for sacrifice to their gods. In bizarre heathen ceremonies and rituals, the hearts of the captives would be literally torn from their bodies in a horrible execution, and then the bodies mutilated and ritually eaten. It was an ugly thought, therefore, to consider capture in battle, and the Spaniards tried to put it from their minds as they prepared to move inland again to the city-state of Tlaxcala.

Cortez conferred often with the Totonac chiefs in those few days, about the Tlaxcalans, and he was not made less anxious by their reports. The Tlaxcalans were a war-like cousin tribe to the Aztecs, who like the Totonacs resented Aztec domination, but who would undoubtedly resist any advance into their

territory, even from the pale-skinned invader whose god-like coming had been predicted as by several Anahuac oracles. The Tlaxcalans, like the Totonacs, did not put as much faith in the Aztec oracles' predictions as the Aztec priests themselves, and would never allow an unimpeded entry into their domain by the Spaniards. Even Aztec forays into Tlaxcala territory were restricted by mutual agreement, and tribute was paid to Aztec collectors under frequent protest. But the Tlaxcalans would prefer feudal overlordship to invasion by an unknown enemy. Such was the judgment of the Totonac caciques.

Cortez pondered over all this long hours, and while he did, the second visit from the Aztecs occurred. Tendile himself did not come this time, because Montezuma did not want him to humble himself before Cortez by appearing before him twice. Lesser lords were sent, and more militant ones, and they arrived at Cortez' headquarters at Cempoalla one gray day about a week after Montezuma's conference with Tendile and Guatemozin. Marina again translated for the two groups, but now there was a difference in her demeanor, and that of Cortez. She stood very close to him now when she interpreted, and Cortez touched her often, and affectionately. She had been called to his bed twice more, since that first occasion, and on both of the latter visits she had stayed all night, leaving only at dawn.

Marina had accepted Cortez and his True Faith with her whole heart and soul.

And she was in love.

At the meeting with the Aztecs, at Cortez' villa near the central square of Cempoalla, there was a

different atmosphere from that aboard shipboard earlier. There were just a few small gifts from the Aztecs, and a tough line from them. Marina was obliged to translate more exactly than before, and tempers flared slightly. Cortez was indignant that Montezuma should send a second mission to him for the purpose of asking him to leave Mexico, and the Aztec nobles were irritated by Cortez' arrogance. When they left, it was with the warning that Cortez' continuing presence in Anahuac was an offense to their gods, who would soon have to be appeased. Cortez' reply was to fire off three cannons in their presence, and to suggest that these fearsome weapons were the right arm of his God, and that one day soon he expected to meet with Montezuma in his capital, where all their differences would be resolved, one way or another.

Several days after the Aztecs were gone again, Cortez got his Indian army together and left Cempoalla for Tlaxcala.

Marina dreaded the invasion of new territories, but she now accepted anything Cortez did as proper and right. She could think of little but her great love for him, and be grateful for their time together. Cortez had already told her of his abandoned wife back in Cuba—the daughter of a Spanish official—and explained that under the laws of his church, no other wife could ever be taken by him. But Marina was not concerned about ultimacies and eventualities. She was only thankful that she had him now, and that she could ease his burden by being at his side.

The march inland to Tlaxcala was a difficult one. They started out on August 16, 1519, with high hopes of conquest and fortune, but by the time they

had gone inland for two days, they were a tired, dispirited, ragged group. The terrain through the jungle was rough, and they had come into the rainy season. Many began coming down with malaria and intestinal disorders. Cortez was compelled to ride up and down the straggling ranks of his men with brisk little speeches and optimistic comments. Marina rode in the van at the rear of the army, and Cortez managed to see her at least once each day, to inquire of her comfort. On the fourth day they began climbing upward into mountains, beyond which was the table-land of the central isthmus. The air grew cooler, and there were fewer new complaints of illness. In these heights, they came upon a town called Naulincò, where the Totonacs had friends, and the small army stopped there for food supplies and rest, and to send scouts ahead to meet with any Tlaxcalans found in the countryside beyond, and announce to them their intended peaceful entry.

At this town, during a warm afternoon in a small villa offered for their comfort by the local cacique, Marina sat in a back room with Dona Isabel, her friend since San Juan de Ulua, and they spoke of what lay before them.

They sat chewing on native *tortas* there, with the sun slanting in on them from a low doorway. Isabel was reclining on a pandanus pallet, and Marina sat on a low wood stool. Cortez was in another room of the stucco house, conferring with his officers. Marina missed him whenever she was not with him, and he was always in her mind.

"Did you meet the general's wife, when you were in Cuba?" Marina asked Isabel, as they sat quietly together in the privacy of that small, dirt-floored room. "Is she a beautiful woman?"

Isabel smiled. She was slightly taller than Marina, older, and more buxom in her shape. She had dancing eyes and a small cleft in her chin, and because she was from Seville, her skin was olive-hued. She had improved Marina's Spanish grammar greatly in the short time they had been together, with the help of Jeronimo Aguilar.

"I have not met her personally, Marina. But I have heard that she wears a sour expression and is skinny, and that her breasts are like two limes that have been sucked dry."

"Is this really true?" Marina said, open-mouthed.

"It's what everybody says," Isabel told her.

Marina was staring past Isabel with a faint smile on her lips. Her hands went to her full breasts, and moved slowly over them. Isabel smiled again.

"I'm certain that you're more beautiful than she," she said. "And your beauty is more exotic, too, to the general."

"I greatly wish I could believe that, Isabel."

"Believe it," Isabel encouraged her. She leaned toward Marina. "Anyway, he doesn't love her."

Marina narrowed her dark eyes on Isabel. "Are you sure?"

"Everybody knows it. He hardly saw her during the last six months prior to our sailing. There is some trouble with her family, and with Governor Velasquez. The governor withdrew his support from the expedition, but Cortez appealed directly to the king in Madrid, and is here on questionable authority from an official of the crown."

"The general is here without clear authority from his king?" Marina asked with mild surprise.

Isabel shrugged. "He expects official support at any time, particularly since his shipment of gold to

Madrid. In the meantime, your general is little more than a private brigand and adventurer, despite the crosses he places in the temples, and the priests he brings with him."

Marina sat there with the uneaten torta in her right hand, thinking about what Isabel had said. Quite suddenly, she lost her fear of him, and simultaneously felt an increased devotion to him and his impetuous cause.

"He is an incredible man!" she said softly.

"Yes," Isabel agreed. "Every Spanish woman on the expedition envies you a little, Marina. The general is the kind of man most of us dream about, when we are young."

"He needs me even more than I imagined," Marina added.

Isabel watched Marina's face for a moment, and the emotion in it. "Just a word of caution, my dear. Cortez is—different from the rest of us. He has dreams that most of us can never understand. I wouldn't like to see you attach yourself too closely to him. Do you understand me?"

"I'm not sure," Marina said somberly.

Isabel looked down at her feet. "It's just that—well, the general is a man of destiny. A destiny that, I suspect, no woman will ever be able to compete with, no matter how important she becomes to him."

Marina sat silent for a long moment, then she finally spoke. "I demand nothing of him. I only accept what he gives me of himself, gratefully. He has taken me from slavery and given me importance, and love, and physical pleasure. I want only to serve him well for as long as he needs me."

Isabel nodded. "Of course, Marina. You can be an important influence on him, too. He is a brilliant

strategist, and you've seen how good he is with the soldiery. Any other man would be hanging from a cotton tree for scuttling their fleet and isolating them in this hostile land. But he tends to deal with the Indians less sensitively, less politically. You can be a gentling influence on him, Marina, and save a lot of bloodshed, if he will only listen to you at the right times."

"Yes, I will remember that, Isabel, my friend."

Just at that moment, a soldier appeared in the doorway. It was the fellow called Jamarillo, who had saved Marina's life in the hold of the flagship after she had served Cortez for the first time, and later recommended that a couple of the Tabascans present there be left behind when the army moved out because of their hostility to Marina.

"Dona Marina, excuse me," he said politely, in clear Castilian. "Dona Isabel. The general desires your presence in his briefing room, Dona Marina."

Marina rose, smiling. "Thank you, Jamarillo. I will accompany you there."

"We've just begun our tortas," Isabel complained lightly. "Can't the great Cortez wait until we've filled our stomachs?"

Jamarillo grinned slightly. "I'm afraid not, Dona Isabel. Our scouts are back, and they've been rebuffed by a party of Tlaxcalans. The general is furious, and he plans to move out immediately."

"Oh, dear!" Isabel exclaimed. "I thought we were finally going to have a comfortable night!"

"We expect to be in Tlaxcalan territory by nightfall," Jamarillo added. "The general recommends to the women that they remain here in Naulinco, because he anticipates a confrontation by the Tlaxcalans. Except for Dona Marina, of course,

who is considered military personnel."

Marina and Isabel exchanged slow smiles, then Isabel spoke up. "Stay here in this flea-trap of a village? Not this one, thank you! I'll take my chances with the army."

"That's what the general expected most of you to say," Jamarillo smiled at them. "Then you must be ready to leave within the hour."

"We'll all be ready," Isabel replied, "when the general is."

Marina had a brief talk with Cortez in private, and she felt closer to him than ever before. He was very irritated by the report of his scouts, and suggested the possibility of attacking the first Tlaxcalan town they came to, but Marina persuaded him to let the Tlaxcalans set the mood of their confrontation, and wait for them to make the initial move. They were a proud, emotional people, Marina told him, and an attack on one of their towns would cause them such a loss of face before their gods that they would be obligated to defend their territory to the last man.

Cortez, reluctantly, agreed to let the Tlaxcalans move first, and Marina's influence with him continued. However, that influence was to avail little to avert bloodshed in this coming confrontation. The Aztecs, working their dark diplomacy in the path of advance of the Spaniards, had goaded the Tlaxcalans into a frenzy of hate and fear.

When the Spanish soldiers came, they were ready.

There was no sighting of Tlaxcalans on that first afternoon as they moved forward from Naulinco. The Spanish-Indian army camped in the high ground beyond Naulinco, and were cold after the heat of the *tierra caliente* of the coast. Marina and

Cortez slept together that night, but he was quiet and moody, and made love to her without enthusiasm only as a means of releasing tensions. Marina did not mind, as Isabel or some other European woman might have. Her primary reason for existence was to serve Cortez in any small way, regardless of her own personal desires. Her reward was in being with him, and in being important to him.

The army moved again at dawn. Marina, hoping for an avoidance of bloodshed as they neared the small city of Tlaxcala, asked for and was given a chestnut gelding to ride on up front with the cavalry, instead of staying at the rear, behind the Totonac columns. She had mastered her fear of horses while still at San Juan de Ulua, and had ridden occasionally on the way there. She had done well under the tutelage of the Cortez aide Jamarillo, who had taken a protective interest in Marina since he had saved her life aboard ship.

The army moved slowly into Tlaxcalan territory all through that morning, with Marina riding near Cortez in the second rank of cavaliers. It was a sunny, cool morning, and the countryside around them was rocky, with twisted mountain trees and occasional wildflowers.

It was about mid-morning, as they came nearer and nearer to the location of the capital of the Tlaxcalans, that the first Tlaxcalan warriors were sighted. It was a small party of typical Indian warriors, on foot, with no vehicular conveyances. They wore only loin-cloths, except for a few military leaders, who also wore a close-fitting tunic, quilted thickly for defense. The warriors' bodies were painted with bright designs, and many wore some kind of grotesque mask. The officers or leaders wore

incredibly worked head-pieces to resemble wild animals or birds of prey, and also leather leg and arm shields. They all carried shields of wood covered with leather, highly decorated. For weapons they bore longbows, with quivers of arrows on their backs, and also long javelins or spears, metal-tipped. Some wore long knives at their belts, and a few brandished a thin wooden club, in which were set small, sharp blades of bronze or stone.

The Indians were first seen at a distance of under a hundred yards, as Cortez' army filed up a gradual incline to the crest of a long ridge. When he and his officers spotted them, the party of Tlaxcalans had just emerged from a cover of rock. Cortez held up his hand for the column of his cavalry to stop, and then he and Diaz and Alvarado and the rest of them within sight of the Indians stared for a moment.

"I think we've met our first Tlaxcalans," Bernal Diaz said to Cortez, from his mount beside Cortez' white one.

"By Jesus and Mary, would you look at them!" Cortez said quietly. "The Tabascans were primitive next to these. Look at the beauty of them, Diaz!"

Diaz nodded. "I see also their formidable-looking bows and javelins, General." He looked beyond the party of thirty-odd Indians to the crest behind them. "Surely this isn't all they've sent against us."

Just then Marina rode up to them on the chestnut gelding, concern in her young face. She was wearing a light-colored Spanish dress, but she straddled the horse, like a man. Cortez had found a small-size breast-plate for her, and she now wore it over her clothing.

"General," she said breathlessly. "Maybe we can talk with them. Let me try. Please."

Cortez turned to her. He was bareheaded, holding his helmet under his left arm. He looked particularly handsome to her now, as he studied her for a moment.

"All right. A few of us will ride forward. Diaz. Alvarado." He turned. "Sandoval. And Father Olmedo."

They came forward to him. The Indians were now gesturing and talking excitedly, amazed by the horses and the armor. Cortez regarded them silently for a long moment, then gave the signal for his officers to move forward with him. "All right," he said. "Let's try diplomacy."

They rode forward slowly, in a tight knot, Marina in front with Cortez and Diaz. The Indians became more excitable and fell back ten yards. Cortez went forward a little further, until there was only a thirty-yard separation between them.

"All right, Marina," he said, his right hand on his sword hilt.

Diaz kept his hand beside his sword, too, and Alvarado had drawn the heavy arquebus pistol that he always carried with him.

Marina spoke loudly, so that the Tlaxcalans would hear her clearly. "We come in peace to you," she told them. "We ask permission to visit your great city."

There was some muttering among them, and then a leader, a fellow wearing a grotesque bird's-head mask with bright plumage decorating it, yelled back to Marina in Nahuatl.

"Turn back now, white invaders, while you still can!"

Marina hesitated, then translated for Cortez. As she spoke, she saw his face fall into grim lines.

"Tell them," he said carefully, "that we have no

intention of turning back. That there are no longer boats to take us away, that we are committed to exploration of Anahuac and all its tribal nations."

Marina translated, and then the leader who had spoken before was shouting back at her. "*This is as far as you go! Your exploration is finished!*"

"The impudent beggars!" blonde Alvarado exclaimed grimly. He set his helmet down over his head. "Let's give them a taste of Spanish iron!"

"Wait!" Father Olmedo said. He had baptized Marina aboard ship. "Look! On the crest of the rise!"

But they had all seen it. At a cry from the leader of the small war party, suddenly the crest of the hill was bristling with Tlaxcalan warriors. They kept coming, more and more of them, in a long line that stretched away on both sides of the Spaniards.

"Good God!" Diaz muttered.

"There are thousands of them!" Sandoval said excitedly.

"They look like demons from hell," Olmedo said, crossing himself.

In just moments there was a thick line of them above the Spaniards as far as the eye could see in either direction. Then the leader of the small party in the fore, who had yelled at them just moments before, gave another sharp outcry, and suddenly his small group was showering Cortez' lead party with javelins and arrows.

It all happened so fast that they were caught off-guard. Horses reared and plunged; an arrow sank into Sandoval's left arm, and another glanced off Cortez' breast-plate.

"*Withdraw!*" Cortez yelled to them. "*Fall back to our columns!*"

A javelin came whistling past Marina's head, and

then an arrow hit her breast-plate. She almost fell off her mount, but then Cortez was beside her, guiding her gelding around, and they were heading back to their lines. The small party of Indians stopped their attack then, and fell back to their massed comrades.

In moments, Cortez and Marina and the others arrived at their lines of cavalry. Alvarado, in the excitement of defending himself, had failed to fire the pistol, so not one reply had been made to the hostilities of the Tlaxcalans yet. Cortez intended to remedy that immediately.

"Fall into attack formation!" he yelled to his excited cavaliers. *"Bring up my Spanish infantry, and situate the Totonacs just behind them!"* He turned abruptly to Marina. "Get to the rear, Marina!"

"My general, please allow me—"

"To the rear!" he thundered at her.

Marina avoided his eyes, and wheeled her mount away, heading toward the last columns of the re-forming cavalry. They were lining up in a long double line now, facing the wildly-yelling enemy only sixty yards away. The Spanish infantry was also re-forming ranks directly behind them, some with muskets, but most armed with lances that were barely superior to the javelins of the Tlaxcalans. But every last man of them wore breast, leg and arm plates, an iron helmet, and carried an iron shield. The Totonacs, behind them, who had begun yelling now as loudly as the Tlaxcalans, carried their javelins and bows and did not look nearly so fierce as their Tlaxcalan counterparts.

Cortez now rode up and down before his cavalry on his white stallion, shouting orders at Diaz, Alvarado, Aguilar, and the other captains of

cavalry. The Spanish horses whinnied and reared nervously, and behind them was a great clanking of armor as the infantry moved up into long lines of attack.

While they were still organizing, though, there was a shrill and unnerving outcry from the thousands of Tlaxcalan warriors just above them on the slope, and suddenly that entire massive army was running wildly toward them, in a frenzied attack such as Cortez had never yet seen.

"Here they come!" he yelled. *"All right, cavaliers! St. Jago, and at them!"*

Marina saw and heard it all, from her position astride her gelding, in the rear of the Spanish infantry. The Tlaxcalan warriors came like wild animals, with an abandon and fearlessness that the Spaniards had not seen at Tabasco in that small, short engagement. These were fierce warriors who had no fear of the pale-skins or their horses, and were determined to kill them to the last man.

Just as the Tlaxcalans reached the Spanish lines, the cavaliers charged into their masses, and the engagement was on. There was wild whooping from the Tlaxcalans, and the scattered fire of musketry and pistols as the Indians swarmed through the cavalry and Spanish infantry and reached the Totonac warriors. In moments, the Spanish army was overwhelmed with the numbers of the Tlaxcalans, and were fighting for their lives. The cavaliers made the greatest impact on them, riding through them recklessly, knocking them down in a broad swath, stabbing and cutting with their swords, and occasionally firing off a pistol into their faces. When the numbers of the Tlaxcalans penetrated through the ranks of infantry and got to the Totonacs, the

Totonacs quickly panicked in the rush of this wild attack and fell back, defending themselves as they did so. They were cut down fast by arrows and javelins, and many were hacked to pieces by Tlaxcalan knives.

Cortez was in the very thick of the attack, riding with his cavaliers. The horsemen were completely surrounded by the enemy, and it was difficult to keep mounted. Warriors wearing ugly animal heads sprang onto the riders, some with animal claws on their hands, trying to drag the cavaliers from their mounts. On every side of Cortez he saw fierce-looking warriors on the sides and backs of his cavalrymen, jabbing with obsidian knives or pulling both horse and rider to the ground. When a cavalier went down, several Tlaxcalan warriors would pounce upon both the man and the horse, cutting them to shreds with stone and bronze knives. It was the most bloody battle that Cortez had ever seen or heard of. He rode savagely through them, slicing the sword against the necks and heads of wild-looking warriors. He saw one of his officers go down, and then another. The second one was beheaded, alive, as Cortez tried to get to him. He crashed into the warriors bending over the man, slashing most of a warrior's face off, and stabbing through the torso of another. Near him, Diaz was hit in the side with an arrow, and Alvarado almost cut an Indian in half to get him off his mount.

Marina, who had thought she was away from the fighting, now found herself in the thick of it. Several infantry soldiers gathered around her to protect her as the Tlaxcalans surged among them, but then they went down, one after the other, as the Tlaxcalans jumped on them and knocked them down and

hacked at them with their knives. Marina had been given a cavalier's sword by an officer, and now she found that she had to defend herself with it as she tried to move her horse away from the fighting. A big warrior with a wildly-painted face hurled a javelin into the side of the gelding, and then attempted to pull her off the horse. She brought the sword down onto his right arm, and it cut neatly through flesh and bone, almost severing the limb. The fellow fell away, yelling. Another Indian attacked Marina from behind, and the horse reared and stepped on his chest after knocking him down, crushing him under its hoofs. Then Marina broke into the clear toward the rear of the position, where a few Tlaxcalans were trying to get past defenders to the vans and equipment.

Cortez was still mounted, as the battle wore on, and the infantry began holding, and the cavalry started taking its toll of the enemy. The well-trained Spanish cavaliers, feared throughout Europe, kept their poise throughout the attack, and most of them stayed mounted, and they felled one enemy after another, knocking others down and trampling them under the hoofs of their horses. Cortez ignored the mutilated bodies of men he knew well and had personally recruited for the expedition, and kept yelling encouragement to his troops.

"At them, comrades! Our God is with us! If we fail now, we're doomed here in this hostile and heathen land! Cut them down, my Castilian brothers, for St. Jago and the crown!"

With these exhortations always with them, the cavaliers kept mowing down the opposition methodically, and gradually a small miracle occurred—the Tlaxcalan warriors, being finally cut to pieces with

Spanish swords and lances and scattered musket fire, began withdrawing up the slope again. Around them, as they fell back, were the bloody and mutilated corpses and dying figures of their comrades and the Spaniards they had downed, so thick that in places, they lay two and three deep. There were literally pools of blood through which they splashed on their withdrawal, and parts of human bodies, and of horses.

Cortez and his small army pressed on against them to the crest of the rise, harassing them in their departure. Behind him, his infantry was now cutting off the escape of stragglers, and hacking them up badly. Finally, at the crest of the slope, Cortez raised his hand for the cavaliers around him to halt their advance.

"All right! Let them go!" he yelled. *"The day is ours!"*

The last of the Tlaxcalans disappeared in the next few minutes, and it was finally over.

Cortez turned to his remaining force and looked over the battlefield. It was strewn with dead and dying. Many of his mounted cavaliers were wounded in various places, including Diaz, Alvarado, and Alonzo Avila. Cortez himself was bleeding from the right arm and from the neck. It had been a life-or-death struggle.

But they had won it.

Cortez rode stiffly back through the ranks of foot soldiers and returning Totonacs, viewing the carnage. *"You did it, lads!"* he congratulated them. *"You gave the heathen something to think about this day!"*

"For God and St. Jago!" someone yelled back heartily, referring to the town in Cuba where many of them came from.

But most did not answer the general. They were still remembering that incredible assault by the ferocious Tlaxcalans, and looking about to see which of their comrades and friends lay dead.

Cortez came upon the vans at the rear, and saw Marina and Isabel at a nearby van, comforting a sobbing Spanish woman. A few Tlaxcalans had reached the wooden-wheeled vehicle, and overturned it, and killed two of the women before being driven off by infantry and Totonac warriors. Cortez caught Marina's gaze, and they stared at each other for a long moment before either of them said anything.

"I'm pleased to see you alive and well, Dona Marina," Cortez said simply.

Marina had not known, until that moment, that Cortez had survived the bloody attack. "And I, you, General," she replied, feeling something well up in her throat that made her lip tremble for a moment.

She did not remark on his wounds, and he made no comment about the two women who lay dead near the van. Words would not heal the many wounds of battle, nor bring the dead back to life. And the Spaniards had, after all, been victorious.

But Marina could not help wondering, as Cortez turned away, how they could ever survive a battle with the terrible and massive Aztec army, if this Tlaxcalan encounter could be so savage; or what desolation might prevail after a military defeat at the hands of Anahuac warriors, if what she saw here was victory.

Chapter Four

All through that long night that followed, the Spaniards cleared the battlefield of their wounded and dead, disentangling them from the corpses of the Tlaxcalans.

It was a grim task.

The weapons of the Indians had cut and sliced flesh as if at a native butchery pen. Some corpses were so mutilated as to be unidentifiable. Javelins still thrust through bellies, and clubs with knives were stuck into backs. As for the Tlaxcalans, muskets had blown the sides off heads, lances had pierced rib cages, and cavalry swords had slashed and dismembered body parts. A few crossbows had gotten into the fight at the last, and their bloody arrows had ruptured chest cavities and ripped through abdomens.

For the Tlaxcalans, it had been slaughter.

To the Spaniards, it had seemed a hell worse than any predicted by their church for lost souls.

No Spanish prisoner had been taken alive, though, and that was also a victory of a kind for Cortez' army. It was well known to the Spaniards now that a primary goal of the Mexican warrior in battle was to take prisoners. Those unlucky enough to be captured were returned to the capital of the

victors and sacrificed to angry gods in the most inhumane ways. These rituals were important in the Aztec and other tribal religions, and the atrocities involved were performed with serious dedication. The sacrifice could not be made casually, nor without the most savage trauma to the victim, and when the heart was cut out to feed to the stone gods at the sacrificial altar, it was absolutely necessary that that organ still be pulsing in the priest's hand as he tore it from the victim's chest cavity and placed it in the mouth of the deity.

Consequently, because of the terrible things that might occur to a Spaniard caught alive by the enemy, none relished the thought of capture in battle. In fact, many soldiers had lost considerable sleep in the dark nights preceding that encounter with the Tlaxcalans, worrying over that possibility, and how to avoid it. There was a kind of mutual pact among the conquerors, therefore, that every man would be his brother's protector in the event of imminent capture, and would give aid to such a soldier as a first priority, over all other considerations, and at the risk of their own lives. Also, tactical plans included, with Cortez' approval, the procedure of keeping ranks closed against the enemy, while in hot combat, and avoiding individual isolation from the main body of men. The cavaliers, so easily dismounted by overpowering numbers of men on foot, were particularly sensitive to this rule, and had fought back-to-back and in close contact with each other, in the battle with the Tlaxcalans.

But, for all practical purposes, the Tlaxcalans were now beaten. There was some additional fighting on the following day, as Cortez moved on the city, but within forty-eight hours of that fierce

first encounter, the humbled war council in Tlaxcala had asked Cortez for a cessation of hostilities.

Through an incredible, almost superhuman effort, the Spaniards had prevailed over enormous odds against them. The spectre of defeat and death had hovered over them, but they had been unwilling to recognize it, and had survived.

In Tenochtitlan, the heart of the Aztec empire, Montezuma was incredulous and stunned by reports from Tlaxcala. The Aztecs knew the Tlaxcalans to be fierce warriors, and now a few hundred Spaniards and a small Totonac support had demolished the Tlaxcalan army and forced a conditional peace. There were stories of fire-breathing steeds striking down the Tlaxcalan soldiery by the thousands, while the pale-skins mounted on them brandished long knives that killed like a scythe fells corn. Montezuma received his worried priests in his sumptuous palace and heard their dark conclusions that Cortez must, indeed, be a god-emissary, to be so invincible in battle. No matter the odds, he always prevailed—he was unbeatable.

The young noble-warrior Guatemozin came to Montezuma on hearing of the Tlaxcalan defeat, and pleaded with Montezuma to give him an army to send to meet the Spaniards. They met alone in Montezuma's private quarters, and Guatemozin was very excited.

"There are rumors that the Spanish want to see our holy city, Cholula. Let me meet them there in our righteous might, and annihilate them in their weakened condition!"

Montezuma stood near a window, staring out through it, looking very somber. He no longer believed in the possibility of an annihilation of the Spaniards, or of their defeat.

"They do not appear weak to me, nephew. Nor do they, I suspect, to the ravaged Tlaxcalans."

Guatemozin raised his voice in volume. "You listen to the counsel of old men and cowards!" he said loudly, "when we should be massing our great army for battle!"

Montezuma turned to him, and his face was heavy-lined, his eyes anxious. "I am frightened, nephew. I admit it. If you are not, maybe you are blessed, who knows? But I cannot send our brave young men out to lose their souls to the terrible Malinche who fights like a god. I am responsible for their eternal spirits, as I am for yours, and mine."

Guatemozin now fumed at him. "*The Malinche cannot harm our souls!* When we kill that pale-skinned impostor, he will bleed just like any of us, and he will be consumed by our wrathful and rightful gods, just as if he were a common Totonac slave!"

Montezuma eyed him acidly. "Can you promise me that, my hot-headed nephew? After seeing the Malinche's black magic worked over the savage Tlaxcalans?"

Guatemozin looked for a moment as if he might shout an obscenity at his emperor, but then he quickly turned away, breathing hard. In a moment, he spoke again, and his voice was under control.

"If we do nothing," he said flatly, "the damnable Spaniards will soon be at our city gates. Does that not make you just a little anxious, my king of kings?" The last was said with unveiled sarcasm.

Montezuma ignored the insult, since it was from one of his royal family. "I did not suggest that I don't share your anxiety," he said soberly to his volatile nephew. "It is your rashness that I will not become a partner to."

Guatemozin turned back to him. "Very well. If you are anxious, as every citizen of this great state is anxious, then at least allow me to send an embassy to Cholula."

"For what purpose?" Montezuma asked.

"To encourage their resistance in some way, should the Spaniards make that their next stop, and if a feasible plan presents itself," Guatemozin answered, his cheeks flushed slightly. "Maybe, even, we can insure that the white-faces go to Cholula, if you give me immediate authority."

"How?" the emperor questioned him.

"Leave that to me, my emperor," Guatemozin said, seeing that he had made a successful opening in Montezuma's resistance.

Montezuma shrugged, turning again to stare out the window. If they could deter the advance of the Spaniards, and make more trouble for them without casting guilt on him and his people, maybe Tenochtitlan could be spared a confrontation. "All right, nephew," he said heavily. "You may send your clandestine embassy."

Guatemozin grunted satisfaction. "Consider it done, my king."

On that same evening outside Tlaxcala, the night before Cortez would enter the capital in triumph, there was quiet celebration in the Spanish camp. Wine was drunk, and wounds were tended, and the soldiery wondered what kind of prize they had won, in the capitulation of the enemy. The mild festivities were interrupted, though, by the arrest of two Tlaxcalan emissaries as spies, sent by a general without the council's knowledge to gather intelligence that might possibly strengthen the council's bargaining position in the peace talks the following

day. Marina was partly responsible for their discovery—having overheard part of an incriminating conversation—and when a confession was wrung from them, had felt badly about the entire incident, in that moment of growing peace, and had asked Cortez to be lenient with them. That had been in mid-evening, and now, at midnight, she and Cortez were alone in the privacy of his sleeping tent.

She had just arrived, and the first thing she asked about was the disposition of the spies. "You—did not execute them?" she asked him.

He shook his head. He had just turned to her from lighting a candle on a small table. He wore only his tight-fitting uniform pants, and a light-colored cotton shirt that he often wore at night. The shirt was unbuttoned down the front, revealing his hairy, muscular chest.

"No," he said, "I did not."

She studied his face. He seemed to be avoiding talking about the incident.

"But they received a punishment?" she guessed, hoping she was wrong.

Cortez came over to her. "You were instrumental in their discovery, my fair Malin. Why do you exhibit so much concern for them now?"

The question was difficult to answer. It was just that she wanted no further violence now, that the ugly battle for Tlaxcala was behind them.

She shrugged. "They were just doing an unpleasant job for an indiscreet subordinate general."

"Is that the way you see it?" he asked seriously.

She paused. "Yes."

His eyes flashed something then, a darkness she had seen in them on the battlefield, when he was mowing down the enemy with his bloody sword. But

then he relaxed, and smiled at her. "We will not talk of unpleasantness on this eve of our new alliance with the Tlaxcalans. There is talk already on the part of the council about giving me Tlaxcalan troops for Tenochtitlan. This is a time to be content with our great accomplishments."

"Yes, General," she said softly. "It is."

He touched her cheek. He was very close to her, and she could smell the male odor of him. He looked very martial to her, even without his armor.

"When we are in private," he said quietly to her, "it would please me if you would call me Hernando."

Marina's cheeks flushed slightly. "Oh, I could not presume to do so, General!"

He held her chin in his hand now. "It would please me," he said firmly.

Marina swallowed hard. "Very well—Hernando." It sounded bizarre, to address him in so familiar a manner, even though she had been intimate with him.

"Now we are true friends," he announced rather loudly.

"I—am honored," she said uncertainly to him. She touched him on his thick biceps, and closed the small distance between them.

Cortez' arms embraced her powerfully then, and quite suddenly he was kissing her fiercely, his hands moving roughly on her. She tried to forget all the death and misery she had seen in the past couple of days then, and gave herself to him. The long dress was almost torn off her as they clutched at each other in the dimness of the tent, and later, on the pallet-bed, with her hot curves pressed against him, he probed into her hard and passionately, with an almost grim insistence that seemed to border on

desperation. This time their union was not so extended nor measured, because he was unable to withhold or restrain his violent climax, but the intensity was so fevered that she felt ravaged under the brutal assault, which left her feeling very much like a Tlaxcala battlefield victim when it was over. She lay there then, breathing raggedly, her full breasts swelling, with him still filling her with his fiery manhood, and as he grunted with final ecstasy, she wondered what kind of love affair she had gotten herself involved in, with this soldier from across the seas.

When he had separated himself from her, and lay exhausted beside her on the pallet, she remembered her question to him earlier, the one he had not answered, about the prisoners, and turned to him to repeat it. When she moved, she was sore between her legs.

"Before I sleep," she said quietly, "I would like to know if the Tlaxcalan officers I reported to you fare well this night."

Cortez glanced at her darkly, irritated that the matter should still be on her mind, after their love-making.

"Do you still persist in this?" he said sourly.

"Excuse me—my Hernando. It is just that I feel badly that—"

He interrupted her petulantly. "They received a traditional punishment for thieves, because they sought to steal secrets from us," he said quickly. "They lost their hands."

Marina's eyes widened in shock, and she turned slowly toward him, still feeling the effects of his brutal satiation on her. "You—cut off their hands?"

"You wanted them returned alive!" he said curtly.

"But—holy Jesus," she whispered. "Such a punishment is worse, to a Tlaxcalan, than death!"

He sat up beside her, suddenly angry. "They received justice, and their lives! And as for you, my Malin maiden, I suggest you decide whether your sympathies are with your Indian cousins, or your adopted Spanish friends!"

Already stunned by his news of the Tlaxcalans' punishment, Marina was now frightened by him, as he glared down at her, with the darkness in his eyes again. She looked away from him, her own eyes moist.

"My loyalty remains undivided," she said into the darkness.

His anger dissipated as quickly as it had come. When he spoke, his voice was gentle, and under control. "I'm glad to hear it," he told her curtly. "Because the most important factor in our success here is continued unity. Now forget all of this, and dream of the success of the expedition."

She brushed away a tear. "Yes," she murmured.

But as Cortez lay on his side facing away from her, and she heard his even breathing in the stillness of the tent, Marina lay there in the darkness and hoped that she had not gotten into something that was beyond her understanding. And she prayed that, as her future unfolded, providence would allow for a comfortable wedlock between the ambitions of her Spanish general and her personal honor.

Despite the punishment meted out to the Tlaxcalan spies, the council offered a military alliance to Cortez that next day. His army was received royally in Tlaxcala, and Xicotencatl promised Cortez enough troops to replace the ones

lost in their small war. Xicotencatl acknowledged a kind of fealty to Cortez' distant king, and also allowed Cortez' priests to place the Christian cross in Tlaxcalan temples, but with no concession to Cortez' god.

Then came the surprise. The council at Cholula, the holy city of Anahuac, sent an embassy to invite Cortez to visit their sacred town before he marched to Tenochtitlan, since to do so would be but a slight detour for him. Cortez had already heard of the religious capital, with its great temples and holy places, and considered the invitation a great triumph for him and his army. Consequently, he accepted the welcome promptly, and announced his intention to march to Cholula, with his new Tlaxcalan reinforcements, within three days' time.

In those three days, Cortez' army healed. They had been through one of the bloodiest battles ever fought by Spaniards anywhere, and against greater odds. There were many bandages changed, and compresses applied, and medicines administered. They were billeted in a sizeable structure in the white-washed Tlaxcalan city, a public building surrounded by walls, and their stay was made as comfortable as the Tlaxcalans knew how. Marina did not see much of Cortez in that period, but kept pretty much to herself when she was not needed at public functions, and she was ready to move on when they left for Cholula.

It was a one-day march to the holy city, and when they arrived there, Cortez' army was greeted by thousands of cheering welcomers, with garlands of flowers and gifts. The Spaniards were invited into the city, but the Cholulans asked their traditional rivals, the Tlaxcalans and Totonacs, to remain

outside. Cortez, eager to be received in that religious sanctuary of the Cholulans and Aztecs, acceded to that request, and left his Indian allies on the outskirts of the city.

The Cholulans had successfully separated the Spanish general from his Indian troops—an accomplishment that the Tlaxcalans had not managed in several days of fierce fighting.

In Cholula, there were the usual meetings with caciques and priests, with Marina at Cortez' side, interpreting for both sides, and watching the faces of the caciques for innuendo and hidden emotions. She did not like what she saw. The leaders were not relaxed, as they wanted the Spaniards to think they were. There was fear and tension in their faces as they spoke, and listened.

Something, Marina deduced, was wrong.

That evening, after a ceremony at a great temple, where Cortez again was allowed to place a cross, the Spaniards were left to themselves in a small palace as their headquarters, and the soldiery drank native wine and ate food prepared by the Cholulans, and celebrated this further accommodation to their march to Tenochtitlan. Again at Tlaxcala and here, the gifts of the Indians had been insignificant in comparison to the expectations of the Spaniards, but now Cortez spoke of marching on to Tenochtitlan the very next day, where the entire army knew that the riches of Anahuac lay.

Midway through that evening, with the same nagging doubts that she had had at Tlaxcala about reporting the spies, Marina nevertheless went to Cortez, because she felt it her duty to do so, and revealed to him her worry over the demeanor of the Cholulans. Cortez, never willing to take Marina's

concerns lightly, sent Alvarado and another officer to secretly arrest one of several warrior-lords who had been shuttling back and forth between the Spaniards and the Cholulan council. Without Marina's knowledge this time, then, Cortez had the Cholulan interrogated in a remote, private room, in inquisitorial fashion. Midway through that tense night, they had wrung the truth from him: the Cholulans planned to ambush the Spaniards as they left the city the next morning, before they could join up with their Indian allies.

They were to be massacred to the last man.

Unknown to Cortez, Guatemozin's agents had been busy.

When Cortez learned of this treachery by the Cholulan council, he understood why he had been invited to its city with such warmth. He had been tricked, and made to look foolish. But for a little luck—Marina's feelings about the Cholulans—his entire army might have been wiped out, and the expedition ended in bloody futility.

Cortez was outraged. None of his officers had ever seen him so angry. "The damnable heathens! The soulless bastards! No European prince would consider such viciousness under the flag of truce! Well, they've lost their advantage, now. The tables will be turned, and these savages will be taught a lesson they won't soon forget!" He stormed about for a long while, letting off steam, but finally he got down to the business of his counter-plot. The Cholulan garrison was quartered in a kind of armory building, not far away. The Spanish contingent would ready itself early, march to the Cholulan garrison before they could leave to arrange their ambush, and catch them there. Then the heathens

would be taught a lesson that would not be lost on those awaiting the outcome of the Cholulan episode in Tenochtitlan.

When Marina was wakened in the wee hours of the morning, she was told by the soldiery only that the Spaniards were leaving Cholula early, because trouble was expected from the Cholulans. Marina found Cortez out in the courtyard, as the men were falling out into ranks, their armor on. Muskets and crossbows and pistols were being distributed among the troops, and the cavaliers saddled their mounts with grim purpose.

"General!" Marina said, coming up to Cortez, who was speaking with Diaz. "What is the trouble? Have you learned something in the night?"

Cortez turned from Diaz, and Marina saw the too-bright glitter in his eyes, and the slight flush in his cheeks. She had noticed that, too, only once before, and that was in the heat of battle at Tlaxcala,

"Yes, my Indian maiden," he said darkly. His voice did not sound like him. "It seems that the Cholulans are not our friends, after all. They have been plotting against us, all the while they showered us with gifts and garlands. We go now to abort that fiendish plot."

Marina wanted to ask him questions, and probe his purpose. But he had already turned away, and was issuing orders to his officers. It was obvious that he was beyond talking to, anyway, at that point. He had crossed the same emotional line that he had at Tlaxcala, when he had performed the miracle of survival against overwhelming odds.

It was still dark when they moved out, but light was glowing in the eastern sky. Cortez figured that the officers and palace guard at the armory would

mostly be billeted there, and would just be rising, to organize their ambush. There would be other small units around the city, and citizens who would be joining their ranks for the attack, but if these leaders and hard-core warriors were stopped, there would be no organization and the ambush would not materialize.

There was no drum-beat as the Spaniards marched along the paved streets of Cholula. There was only the heavy clanking of armor and of weaponry. The infantry went in advance this time, with a few cavalry officers and Cortez up with them. A few Cholulans were on the street, and were surprised by this early departure of the Spaniards from their headquarters. Word was quickly sent to the Cholulan council, which had sat all night, but it was too late for any change of plans, or to call off the ambush. Cortez was now at the armory gates.

There was just the beginning of a rosy light in the sky overhead as the Spaniards marched into the courtyard through the big gates, grim and silent. Inside were crowded hundreds of Cholulan warriors of the noble class—leaders of the military plot—and seasoned underlings. They all stopped what they were doing in shock as the Spaniards marched into the courtyard with them, split ranks, and filed around the entire perimeter of the courtyard, in double file. The Cholulans were at first embarrassed by the fact that they had their weaponry out in massive quantity, readying it for use. But as they observed the heavily-armed Spaniards surrounding them, with their musketry and pistols and cross-bows, the embarrassment quickly gave way to fear and dread.

In just moments the entire Spanish infantry of

about three hundred men had filed around the wall of the courtyard, and were in place, and now Cortez and a few infantry captains filled the open gateway to the place, formidable in their armor. Cortez' face was grim as a Cholulan noble came over to him.

"You honor us with your presence, Malinche. But why do you come to our humble headquarters at such an hour? Do you leave the city early?"

Marina was not with Cortez, but outside the gate, with some cavalry officers. Cortez had ordered her to stay well away from the armory itself, but she had come up with Jamarillo and Aguilar, wondering what Cortez intended. Now that she saw all the Spanish troops inside the wall, she was suddenly filled with apprehension.

Aguilar had come forward to the gate, up behind Cortez, and now spoke to the general over his shoulder. "I think he asks what we are about here," Aguilar said to Cortez. Most of the cavalry officers, including Aguilar and Jamarillo, did not know exactly what Cortez had planned for this moment. They knew only that they must stand ready for battle. Jamarillo expected only a mass arrest by Cortez, or a demand to see the council.

Cortez sat his mount arrogantly, grimly, and when Aguilar had translated, he flipped the visor down on his helmet, so that the Cholulan could no longer see his face. Now all eyes in the courtyard were on Cortez, Cholulan and Spanish. Cholulans stood motionless with stacks of javelins in their arms, or in the act of fastening a military robe over their shoulders, their dark eyes narrowed in hostility and fear.

"This is what we are about," Cortez said throatily. He drew his sword, and brandished it above his

head. *"Death to all who betray the flag of Spain!"*

More Cholulans had streamed into the courtyard from the building, and most were out there now, amounting to close to a thousand men. Most were unarmed, because weapons had not yet been distributed.

A captain of Spanish infantry within the gate echoed Cortez' sentiment, and outside the gate, Marina gasped, and then the courtyard was filled with the noise of muskets and pistols being cocked and readied for fire.

"Good Jesus!" Jamarillo said, beside her.

There was panic in the massed Cholulan ranks in the next couple of seconds, and some yelling, but then, at a signal from Cortez, the entire courtyard was suddenly filled with the roar of gunfire.

In that first volley, several hundred Cholulans were hit. Most fell to the pavement like stones, and others rolled on the ground in agony. Now, while the firearms were being re-loaded, other muskets and a battery of crossbows were fired, bringing down more Cholulans.

Chaos resulted. Cholulans ran in all directions, screaming in panic, but there was no place to go, or hide. A few charged the Spaniards bravely, but most were cut down before they could reach their enemy. Some others tried to break the Spanish perimeter around them and scale the walls, but were shot down as they made the attempt. The cream of Cholulan nobility was being systematically murdered in the withering fire.

"No, stop!"

"We surrender!"

"We lay down our arms!"

But the fusillade continued mercilessly. Screams

rent the early morning air, and blood spilled heavily onto the paving stones, and the acrid odor of gunsmoke lay pungent in the grisly courtyard. Marina, outside the gate still, saw the horror of it, and cried out toward Cortez.

"That is enough! Finish it!"

Musketry still crackled in the air, and corpses were piling on corpses. Crimson holes were blown into chests, bellies, limbs, and metal arrows protruded through torsos. Cortez, his face flushed behind the helmet, his eyes dark with emotion, now raised his sword again.

"All right, cavaliers!" he shouted to his mounted warriors behind him, just outside the gates. *"For St. Jago!"*

Marina, seeing what he had in mind, urged her mount forward desperately, breaking from Jamarillo, riding up to the gate beside Cortez.

"Please, General!" she cried out to him. *"No more! By the holy Mary, no more!"*

Cortez glanced at her briefly, and she could not see his face behind the helmet. Then he spurred his stallion into the courtyard.

His cavalry followed, their swords drawn, a terrible hue and cry coming from their throats as they rode wildly into the enclosure. There were almost two hundred Cholulans still standing amidst the corpses of their comrades, begging to be spared, and now the cavalry went plunging among them, swinging the deadly swords, decapitating and dismembering and mutilating. Cortez himself was right in the thick of it, swinging wildly, chopping the helpless Cholulans down, killing and killing.

"My God, no!" Marina whispered in Spanish.

Jamarillo came up beside her, his face grim.

"Come away from this terrible thing," he urged her.

But she did not hear him. In the courtyard, the slaughter continued. Only a few Cholulans stood now, stumbling over the heaped corpses of their comrades. The cavaliers were spattered with blood, their swords crimson, and still Cortez did not call them off.

Within five minutes, the massacre was complete. No Cholulan inside the courtyard lived.

Marina got one last look at Cortez when it was finished, holding his bloody sword aloft near the gate, his mount trampling on corpses. She felt sick inside as she turned to Jamarillo.

"*Tell your general,*" she yelled hoarsely at him, "*that I will not serve a madman!*" She wheeled her mount, then, and spurred it away from the gate, heading back toward the quarters they had left earlier.

"*Marina!*" Jamarillo yelled after her.

But there was no stopping her at that black moment. Sick inside and full of disgust for this supposedly holy Spanish enterprise, she galloped down the cobbled street desperately, hoping in the deepest part of her that she would never lay eyes on the Castilian general again.

Chapter Five

The frenzy that Cortez had led his troops into was not finished when the massacre was complete at the armory. When outraged citizens demonstrated against the Spaniards outside the armory in the streets, Cortez allowed his troops to scatter them in all directions, and some of the Spaniards entered the square where a great temple was located, and when the Cholulans bombarded the Spaniards with missiles of various kinds from the temple, the soldiers scaled the temple stairs and set the wooden barriers around it, and the sacred towers, afire. The citizenry was wild with grief, and many more were killed, and the Spaniards did not leave until smoke rolled upward into the clear sky from the square, and blood stained the ruined temple.

When Cortez finally pulled his troops out of the city in mid-morning, joining the Indian allies in their encampment out there, Cholula was a shambles, the council of caciques was stunned into silence, and the Spaniards had committed one of their gravest atrocities of the conquest. But, ironically, the massacre of the Cholulans would end the bloodshed, at least for a while, because when Montezuma heard of the bloody wrath of the Spaniards, later in the day, he trembled on his throne, and despite

disagreement by his generals, sent a messenger out to meet Cortez, saying that the Spaniards would be received by Montezuma in peace.

When the Spaniards marched grimly out of Cholula on that blood-washed morning, Marina knew nothing of this. She hid in an empty room of the palace that had been used by the Spaniards, and cried uncontrollably for the massacred Cholulans, and her disillusionment with the Spanish cause, and the rape of her affection for their general by his own foul deeds.

Jamarillo had left the fighting at the armory, and followed her to the small palace, giving notice to Aguilar of his purpose. He found her there not long after her arrival, sitting alone in the sunlit room she had chosen for privacy in her grief. He sat beside her on a wooden bench, his armor scraping dully in the quiet of the place.

"It is all over," he told her. "The army is marching from the city, to the Indian camp outside. The general has asked about you."

Marina whirled on him, her eyes red and tearful. "*I won't return to him! He is more savage and cruel than the so-called heathens he murders with his guns! He does not practice Christianity!*"

After her outburst, there was a heavy silence in the room. Jamarillo sighed and shook his head through it. "I can't defend what we did this morning," he said quietly. "It was an unconscionable use of force—an overreaction to treachery. If it's any consolation, the priests are just as mortified as you are, Marina. Father Olmedo has threatened to return to Cempoalla, and remove the sanction of the Church from this expedition."

"The placing of crosses is a mockery!" she blurted out.

Jamarillo made no denial. "A number of officers and men went against orders, and refused to keep killing," he said. "We did not all lose control, Marina. All Spaniards here are not Cortez, or Alvarado."

She nodded tearfully. "I know."

"Even the general," he went on carefully, "seemed chagrined when it was over." He hesitated. "He does not always have control of himself, Marina. He is a very complex man, but a man who succeeds at what he sets out to do. And it may just be that this enterprise requires just such a man, in this first clash of cultures, so that the Olmedas and Aguilers may come later and effect necessary but peaceful changes. I do not mean an apology for Cortez. I hope merely to make a rationale for our God's tolerance of him."

Marina looked at Jamarillo. She had felt closer to him than anybody but Cortez and Dona Isabel, because she owed her life to him, and because she felt his affection for her.

"I hate him at this moment, Juan Jamarillo. I hate him, and fear him—and love him." She bit her lip until it bled slightly. "*Oh, God, I love him!*"

Jamarillo touched her shoulder. He felt a tenderness for her that he had not known he was capable of. A tightness gripped his throat, and he tried to swallow it.

"Whatever shall I do?" she sobbed quietly.

Jamarillo thought for a moment. "You cannot stay here. The Cholulans would murder you the moment we're gone."

"I am despised by my own people, and used by the

Spanish," she said bitterly. "I have no place to go, now."

Jamarillo turned her toward him. "You, like myself, are committed to the Spanish cause, Marina. I don't agree with everything Cortez does, but I am dedicated to the world we will make here after our soldiers are gone. So must you be."

"Then you're suggesting I stay with him?"

"The expedition needs us," he said. "Father Olmedo will need us, and so will others. Montezuma may, possibly, need us. I urge you to keep your faith with me. Keep your general at arm's length, if you will, but continue to serve him for the benefit of us all."

Marina wiped at her eyes. "All right, Jamarillo. I'll return to the Spanish camp. But I will not sleep in the general's bed."

Jamarillo touched her lovely face, and felt something stir inside him. "I would be the last to urge it," he smiled at her.

When Marina returned to the camp outside the city, Cortez was already there. Smoke blackened the sky above Cholula, and the Indian allies watched it somberly. A holy city had been defiled. They saw no reason for celebration.

Marina was greeted by Cortez upon her arrival at the headquarters tents, and she responded darkly. He made no apology to her for the massacre, and she avoided speaking with him except on business. He learned of her temporary flight from him, later in the day, but he did not mention it to her.

The army moved at midday, and there would be no more diversions. Cortez was going directly to Tenochtitlan now, the capital of the Aztecs and the

culture and power center of the entire isthmus of Mexico. In late afternoon, the embassy from Montezuma arrived, Cortez received them haughtily, and they conveyed their message from Montezuma; that he would welcome them in Tenochtitlan after all. There was much celebration that evening, and even the soldiery who had regretted the massacre at Cholula joined in the festivities.

They camped that night within a short ride of Tenochtitlan near an Aztec village, and elders came out to them in humble submission with small gifts. In late evening, Cortez sent for Marina. He intended to explain to her the necessity of the Cholula action, as he had the punishment of the Tlaxcalan spies. But she refused his invitation to go to his tent. When the messenger brought this reply back to Cortez, expecting an outburst of anger from Cortez, the general merely sat on his pallet staring at an oil lamp across the tent, making no answer to the report. After several minutes he looked up and, seeing the soldier still there, he dismissed him.

"All right, musketeer, you're excused. I'll keep my own company this night."

"Yes, General," the soldier replied to him.

Marina slept with Isabel and the Spanish women on that eve of the Tenochtitlan adventure. Toward dawn, Isabel was awakened by a soft sobbing, and she was not surprised to find that it was Marina. When she went to Marina's cot to comfort her, Marina made light of her mood.

"I've had a bad dream," she said quietly, in the silence of the tent. Other women were asleep near them.

Isabel shook her head. "No dream has plunged you to such depths. I heard the soldier earlier,

Marina. The general wanted you with him tonight, and you refused. Now you are bothered by the refusal."

"It is not the loss of his company that distresses me, my good friend," Marina said. "It is the loss of something between us that I feel so deeply."

Isabel studied her face for a long moment. "I was terrified by what happened at Cholula, too. I could never have been a part of what Cortez did there. But now Montezuma sends messengers of peace. I don't know what is right. It is beyond my comprehension. I don't have the power of reason that you do, my Malin friend."

Marina glanced at her. "I know only what I feel, sweet Isabel. And I feel a sickness inside, when I remember Cholula."

Isabel nodded. "But you must make a decision tonight, Marina. You must decide whether your conscience will allow you to stand beside Cortez tomorrow, when we reach Tenochtitlan, holding your head high, displaying a united front to Montezuma and showing him that you believe our cause in Anahuac to be a holy one."

Marina shot a quick, hard look at Isabel, and then it slowly softened.

"As Jamarillo pointed out to me," she said somberly, "I have little choice. Don't worry, Isabel. I will stand up for the Holy Trinity, and for our righteous goals."

Isabel smiled. "Then try to get some sleep, before the new day comes."

"Yes," Marina said, lying on her side, her eyes dry now. "Perhaps I can."

It was only two hours later, on a bright, sunny morning, that the army moved out to Tenochtitlan.

Shields shone bright in the sun, and horns trumpeted, and yellow dogs nipped at the heels of the cavalry horses, and yesterday was forgotten as the army anticipated the realization of a dream—their arrival at the capital of the great Anahuac empire and the Aztec nation.

Just before the army decamped, Cortez saw Marina at her van, standing with the other women. He rode up near her, and he looked very war-like, very martial to her that morning. The other women left her side, and he guided his white stallion over to her.

"You look well this morning, Marina."

Marina looked up at him. His beard glinted in the morning sunlight, and she thought she had never seen a more handsome man, or met a more fearsome one.

"And you, too, General."

"You deserted us yesterday," he said without inflection.

Marina nodded. "Will you hang me to a tree, my general?"

He held her angry gaze for a long moment before he spoke. "I told you before, I do what I must to make our expedition succeed."

"Because its cause is just?"

"That's right," he said.

She still held his gaze. "Would you have gone so far, yesterday, if your opponent had been a European army of white men?" she asked soberly. "Would you and your armored men be so zealous to convert the heathen to Christianity, if he owned no gold?"

Cortez' face clouded over darkly for a long moment, and Marina was suddenly sorry she had

spoken to him so insubordinately.

"If you were a Spanish soldier," he said slowly and deliberately, "who spoke thus to me, I would have you executed!"

Marina held her chin up as she replied. "I have no doubt," she said clearly to him.

His mount tried to shy away, and Cortez held it with a powerful grip on its reins. "I know my motivations, Malin princess, and I make no excuses for them. Some day long after the gold and the glory are forgotten, there will be a Christian empire here, because of us. As for my personal honor, my God has the power to strike me down, if I fail to act in accord with His righteous laws." There was a hint of a manic glitter in his eye again, and the fevered look that she would never understand.

"It seems it is you, my Dona Marina, who must examine your motivations," he continued. "Perhaps you feel too deeply for your Indian cousins, and not enough for your friends. I told you to make a choice, and you must make it here, and now. It is them, or us. It is paganism, or Christianity!"

"I do not have to embrace every man who calls himself a Christian, because I am one!" Marina said rather loudly. "Nor do I acknowledge any wrong in feeling deeply for any person, whether he is Cholulan or Spaniard!"

Cortez sat his mount stiffly, not responding. Marina got her indignation under control in a brief moment, and went on.

"As for making a choice, I made it last night." Her voice was softer, and more quiet. "I will still serve you, despite Cholula."

Cortez waited a moment, then replied, and it was in a different voice. "I—need you."

Marina looked up at him, and saw a completely different man from the one who had ridden up so arrogantly. This man was like a boy who has signed on for a sea voyage, and is now fearful that he will never see his home again. In that moment, he seemed to her vulnerable and defenseless. Her lip trembled for a moment, and then she spoke.

"You have me, my general. I—cannot leave you, it seems."

Cortez held her gaze for a moment, smiled briefly, and rode off to his officers.

Again, the breach was healed. Or nearly so.

And now they were off to the Aztec capital.

There was a carnival spirit among the troops as they moved up into high country that morning, marching toward Tenochtitlan. This, at last, was what they had come to Mexico for, this was what they had fought and died for along the way, and suffered for.

When the sun was high in the tropical sky, the army came out onto a high prominence from which they could suddenly view the entire Valley of Mexico, and they drew up in long lines and just stared in fascination for a long time. There were green fields, and gardens, and blue canals, and most spectacular of all, the great city of Tenochtitlan and its suburban villages, set like jewels below them.

The towns they had passed through previously did not prepare them for the sight they now saw, not even their look at Cholula. Tenochtitlan was a sprawling, glamorous metropolis—a fairyland city—set in the middle of a sapphire-blue lake, and surrounded by floating gardens. Great causeways led from the city on three sides to the shore, with complex drawbridges cutting them. The Aztec

capital was as magnificent as anything they had ever seen in Europe, and more exotic. There were murmurings of awe from them as they stared at the spectacle, and new fears and doubts crept into their minds. The city below them was obviously the heart of a mighty and advanced people—a civilization with armed defenses and awesome power. Some wondered what they were doing there with their paltry force, threatening the very existence of such a state. Even if they were admitted to the gates of its capital, would it not then swallow them up in its powerful maw, and do what it would with them? Some of the soldiery saw no other possibility.

But Cortez' resolve was only greater, as he gave orders to his army to descend onto the plateau below them. They had gotten so far on sheer will, not on superiority of numbers, and on their belief in what they were doing. Now, with Montezuma's invitation pending, they would not falter in their resolve. What lay ahead of them was opportunity, and challenge, and those were things that Cortez' soul fed on.

Marina had never seen the Aztec capital, either. She had heard stories of it since childhood, but none of them overstated the reality that now met her eyes. Like some of the Spanish soldiery, she stood in awe, and fear, and hoped that their descending into that glistening stronghold was not madness on Cortez' part.

Marina's van followed the Totonac and Tlaxcalan warriors down the slope and into the valley. She bumped along roughly at first, with Isabel and two other women, and then they came onto a road that led to the southern causeway across Lake Texcoco. Children came onto that road, as it led into small villages, and then adults, cheering the Spaniards and

showering them with flowers. The Spaniards marched steadily through them, a bit apprehensive, following close upon the heels of Cortez and his bright-shining cavalry.

The two vans of Spanish women were excited about seeing the Aztec city, and Isabel was no exception. As they peered out from their van at the growing numbers of Aztecs around them, with their fine garments and black-shining hair, Isabel kept commenting on how handsome the men were, and how tall, in comparison with the other Indian tribes, and what regal bearing they had. This did not excite Marina, though, except adversely. She had heard that the Aztecs were a physically superior people, and that their culture was more advanced, and this confirmation of these stories made her realize that the rest of it, also, was true: that the Aztecs were the fiercest warriors on the isthmus, that they possessed great wealth and power, and that they looked with absolute disdain on anyone who was not Aztec.

As the army reached a village close to the far end of the southern causeway, a covey of messengers came from Montezuma, saying that that great monarch would meet with Cortez in a grand ceremony out on the causeway itself, to welcome the Spaniards to the city. Cortez received this message with much satisfaction, and there was much elation among the troops as they halted for a rest at the village. Then, in late morning, they resumed their march, and soon the mounted cavaliers were on the stone-paved causeway into the city, with the blue waters of Lake Texcoco all around them.

At the other end of the causeway, with throngs of Aztec citizens and warriors around him, Montezuma sat on his gilt-decorated sedan chair, with its

gauze curtains and bright plumes, and waited. He had sent several hundred caciques and nobles out to the Xoloc Gate on the causeway, to greet Cortez when he arrived at that point, and to announce Montezuma's own arrival shortly. Now he could see the iron-suited Spaniards out there, and Cortez' white horse, and there was a messenger running back, announcing readiness at the gate.

In another sedan chair behind Montezuma sat Netoza, Montezuma's first wife in his harem, and his favorite daughter Linala. Gathered around these two conveyances, on foot, were caciques, nobles, and priests. Tendile—the lord who had met Cortez at San Juan de Ulua—stood beside Montezuma's conveyance, and would accompany Montezuma onto the causeway. Also nearby was arrogant Guatemozin, still haughty despite his ill-conceived plot at Cholula.

"The messenger comes," Montezuma said nervously. "We will now enter upon the causeway."

"You must be firm with him, your highness," Tendile said darkly to him. "Do not let him believe we are turning over the city to him and his bloodthirsty followers!"

Guatemozin made a grunting sound in his throat. "If you had released the army to me, we could have met him in the mountains with fifty thousand warriors! And he would never have set foot in our beloved capital!"

But Montezuma, after Cholula, was no longer paying any attention to his nephew. "You can still bluster, after the bloody massacre in the holy city? No, he would not have stopped in the mountains. He has a magic in him. He cannot be beaten, nor deceived!"

A plumage-decorated priest stood beside Tendile,

with painted face and dressed in an elaborate robe. "He comes from Quetzalcoatl! He may not be denied!"

Both Montezuma and Tendile glanced grimly at the holy man for a brief moment, then Montezuma turned to Tendile. "We will acknowledge him as such, whatever the real truth. We will take him into our city as a guest, and treat him like a god-emissary, and make him welcome. Then we will hope he will leave in the same way he came, without making us any trouble."

"And if he does not?" the young Guatemozin suggested bitterly.

Montezuma looked over to him. "I don't know," he said honestly.

A dozen slaves then picked up Montezuma's sedan chair, at a signal from him, and the procession started onto the causeway.

In just a few minutes, the royal procession reached the Xoloc Gate, at a fortress-like bridge. There was already a throng there of Aztec nobles and Spanish soldiery. Cortez had dismounted from his horse, and now sat on a chair, his captains around him. Beside him stood Marina, interpreting for the nobles who had already greeted Cortez effusively. Montezuma saw him from a short distance, and caught his breath, for he had gotten a strong impression, on first sight, that this bearded and armored man was indeed a kind of god. His sedan chair was put down just a few yards from Cortez, the space between them was cleared, and a quick hush fell over the assemblage. Cortez and his captains looked over the Aztec entourage with wonderment, as two lords came and helped Montezuma from his conveyance.

Cortez rose, and turned to Marina. "The exact words. I want his exact words."

"Yes, General," she said breathlessly.

Montezuma now stood beside his sedan chair, in his royal plumage and finery. Gold ornaments hung from his neck and waist, and silver bracelets encircled his arms. Tendile came forward with him, but Guatemozin hung back at the rear. The royal wife and daughter remained in their conveyance, for the time being. They were surrounded by Aztec warriors and nobles, and the waters of the lake around them swarmed with boats laden with local citizens.

Cortez came forward with Marina to greet Montezuma, who was attended by two lords who guarded his person. Tendile and other lords and priests were also in attendance as they met.

In the Spanish manner, Cortez smiled and clasped his hands onto Montezuma's shoulders in greeting. The two lords guarding the emperor defensively grabbed at knives at their waists, but Montezuma quickly put them at ease.

"It is all right, my lords," he said quickly.

Cortez removed his hands, and spoke. "I am Cortez," he said loudly and clearly. "I come from our king of Spain and the Holy See to extend their greetings to the great emperor Montezuma, and to give him their best wishes."

Marina interpreted, and Montezuma watched her face carefully. There was no sound now, except for her voice, and the lapping of the lake water at the causeway foundation. A gentle breeze rippled over the assemblage, a warm one, and reminded Cortez of the one he had felt from the mainland, while still aboard ship at San Juan de Ulua.

When Marina finished, Cortez hung a necklace of fancy cut glass around the neck of the emperor, and Montezuma smiled uncertainly on receiving it. Then he, too, spoke.

"We have known of your coming for a very long time, great lord," he began nervously. He was not a big man, and looked slight next to Cortez. "We are sure the journey has tired you, with all the hazards you encountered from enemies along the way. But now you have arrived safely on the earth, and in Anahuac."

Marina translated, knotted up inside, and Cortez, bareheaded, acknowledged the welcome.

"The Lord Tendile, who has had the honor of serving the great Malinche previously, also welcomes you to our capital," Montezuma continued.

There was a brief exchange of greetings between Tendile and the general, and Cortez noted how much friendlier Tendile was on this occasion, and how much more humility he exhibited.

Montezuma then continued, slightly more at ease. "The chronicles of our forefathers tell us," he said, "that neither I, nor those who inhabit the Valley of Mexico, are descendants of the aborigines here, but from strangers who came to this place from distant parts."

The assemblage—both Aztec and Spanish—listened carefully to the words, as Montezuma went on.

"We also believe that our race was brought here by a lord whose vassals they all were, and who then returned to his distant home. But we have always held that those who descend from him would come to us one day, to view the results of his work, and give us further guidance and inspiration. And

according to the direction from which you came, which is where the sun rises, and from what you tell us of your great god-king beyond the seas, we believe him to be our ancient lord, or his descendant, and we welcome you as his revered emissary."

Marina could hardly believe her ears, as this statement of fealty unfolded to her. The great and powerful monarch of all the Aztecs was all but humbling himself before Cortez because of the Aztec prophecy that she had been hearing about since childhood, and which had followed the Spaniards across the isthmus. Marina studied the face of Montezuma before she spoke, and could find no obvious treachery in it. The company of Spaniards waited anxiously as she began translating, telling Cortez what Montezuma had said. When she had finished, there was a broad smile on Cortez' handsome face.

"I believe he is confused, General," Marina said. "He believes you are descended from, and worship, Quetzalcoatl, rather than the one true God of all Christians."

Cortez nodded, still smiling beneficently at Montezuma. "I know. That's exactly what I hoped for."

Marina turned to stare at Cortez. "But, General. Surely you want to make a statement of our true faith?"

Cortez shook his head. "That will come later. Tell him now that our god-king across the great seas has looked forward to this joining with our Aztec brothers for a very long time, and will be pleased that we have been received so warmly."

Marina was still regarding Cortez quizzically. He had said he despised deceit, but now he was

deceiving Montezuma as to his true purpose in Anahuac, so that he might keep Montezuma's goodwill. She turned to Montezuma, and told him in Nahuatl what Cortez had said, and Montezuma smiled widely, his nervousness temporarily gone. After her speech to him, Montezuma reached out and touched Marina affectionately, and the nobles around them cheered with enthusiasm. The Spaniards also shouted their approval of the proceedings, and there was a high spirit of camaraderie on the causeway in the bright Mexican sun. Cortez and Montezuma clasped hands, but Marina thought Montezuma performed the act with servility, rather than as an equal of Cortez.

Now the ceremony was over, with a flourish of shell horns and trumpets, and Montezuma would lead the Spaniards into his city. Before he turned back to his sedan chair, he spoke to Marina quickly and privately in Nahuatl.

"I understand you are a Malin princess, Malinche."

"Yes, your majesty."

"You comport yourself accordingly. You have made this day much easier for me. I know there are those who mistrust you, out of fear. But you have my affection, Malin girl, and you are welcome here."

Marina bowed low to him. "You honor me, your highness."

Montezuma returned to his conveyance, and it was over. Within just a few minutes, the Spaniards had re-formed ranks and were marching heavily across the causeway into the fair capital of the mighty Aztecs.

Mexico was theirs.

Chapter Six

Tenochtitlan was unlike anything the Spaniards had ever seen before. The mud and stucco huts of the outlying areas immediately gave way to fine houses of red, porous stone lining the broad avenue they marched in upon, and there were many trees and parkways and gardens, criss-crossed at intervals by canals and small bridges. The houses of the nobles were often two stories in height, with beautiful patios and ornate facades. These larger homes were protected by walls with parapets. The Spaniards crossed great squares, lined with porticos of buildings and beautified by trees, and marketplaces where merchants offered all the wares necessary to a thriving society. Occasionally they would glimpse a pyramidal temple, standing majestically among the other buildings. The people who lined the streets and stared from windows and doorways were well-clothed and often ornamented richly. The paved streets rang with the hoofs of their horses, but those sounds, and that of their armor, could hardly be heard above the clamor of the Aztecs around them.

Most of the soldiery were enjoying it immensely, as they marched into the city on that sunny day, but there were those among them, including Cortez himself, who could not avoid a sense of apprehen-

sion as the little army was surrounded by these half-million citizens and warriors of a mighty civilization, and the glittering city swallowed them up behind its causeways and drawbridges.

When the Spaniards marched within sight of the central square, called the *teocalli*, they were even further amazed. The area was ringed by massive, multi-storied buildings and a stone wall, and facades were ornately decorated with carved serpents and other Aztec symbols. Inside these buildings towered the massive Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, a step-pyramid edifice of overwhelming proportions, with broad stone steps leading to its flat top, where there were superstructures of worship and a sacrificial block.

The sight of that sacrificial place caused a moment of fear in the hearts of the tourist-soldiers as they marched past, surrounded by those massive throngs of citizenry. It was quite clear now to every man among them that their force of arms was no longer a protection against the ugliness that the Great Temple symbolized for them, despite their victorious entry into the city. They were a handful of soldiers who had arrogantly marched into the heart of a powerful empire, and the only thing that stood between them and a terrible death was the tenuous belief held by the emperor that they were descended from gods.

Yes, Mexico, for the moment, was theirs.

But their occupation of Tenochtitlan was a little like a child holding a massive Anahuac jaguar by the tail.

The Spaniards were billeted in the Palace of Axayacatl, near the central square. It was a massive, rambling estate, two stories high at its central hall,

with many apartments and gardens and beautiful walkways. Cortez was able to billet his entire Spanish contingent inside the palace, and there was room for the Totonac and Tlaxcalan warriors in the courtyards and adjacent streets. The Tlaxcalans, fierce savages in comparison to the Aztecs, were slightly cowed by the magnificence of Tenochtitlan, and kept to themselves, muttering dark forebodings, knowing they were despised by the Aztecs around them.

Cortez was installed in the largest suite of the palace, where he made his office and also his sleeping quarters, and his aides and officers were billeted near him, including Marina, who was given her own room, as a reward for her loyalty to him.

There were celebrations in the Spanish quarters that evening. The royal palace had prepared a sumptuous feast for their guests, and the Spaniards partook of it boisterously in the main dining hall, with Aztec carvings and tapestries around them. Marina sat on Cortez' left hand at this banquet, and she felt closer to him again. She resolved that she would be patient with him, and exercise her influence on him as Isabel had suggested, and hope to encourage changes in the general that would make him a more civilized man, by her standards. Her love for him would, she hoped, mellow him and make him more gentle. It might make him, perhaps, more like Montezuma, who was more poet than warrior, and who personally deplored, it was rumored, the Aztec religious sacrificial practices.

In mid-evening, while the celebration was in full force, Montezuma visited the Spanish quarters with a bodyguard of palace warriors and a retinue of nobles and servants in attendance. He also had with

him his wife Netoza and his beautiful, dark-haired daughter Linala, and several wives from his harem. Cortez met him and his women at the entrance of the grand hall, and Marina greeted the emperor for them. Montezuma hung a gold-and-shell necklace around Cortez' neck that made the soldiery present mutter in admiration. This was the kind of thing most of them had come to Mexico for, and all they now wanted was for Cortez to wangle some real riches from Montezuma's treasury, divide it among them as he had promised in Cuba, and let them leave as quickly as possible, to return rich to their Cuban farms and homes, or to sail to the motherland with their wealth.

But the gift-giving was finished for the evening; at least, except for a very different kind. Montezuma now led his wives and his daughter Linala out to the fore of his entourage, and he and Netoza made their announcement.

"Now, in deepest friendship and fealty, Malinche," Montezuma said to Cortez, referring to Cortez and Marina by the same name, because Cortez was not a beautiful name to the Aztecs, "I give to your nobles my several wives that you see with me, from my harem, that they may become women of your men."

Marina was not surprised by this, as it was customary in Anahuac among princes. She translated, and Cortez thanked the slight, gaudily-attired Montezuma warmly, but with a kind of arrogant condescension that troubled Marina. She was beginning to fear that Cortez was hearing from too many sources that he was like a god, and had begun to act the part with Montezuma.

But Montezuma was not finished. He turned now

to Linala, and took her arm. "And for the great Malinche, if he so wishes," Montezuma told Cortez, "I give for his woman my daughter Linala, who has expressed a particular affection for his person, and who would consider it an honor to stay with him and comfort him in his new surroundings."

Marina listened with a somber face, and before she translated, she met Linala's gaze, and Linala smiled a hard, beautiful smile at Marina. Montezuma was not even aware, Marina knew, that she was Cortez' woman. But Linala had guessed it, and was enjoying Marina's present discomfiture.

Marina translated, and Cortez' eyes narrowed on her, and then on Linala. Linala wore a sheer garment that showed off her firm breasts and narrow waist, and her chiseled face was as lovely—if slightly harder—than Marina's. She was younger than Marina, in her late teens, but she had a regal, worldly look about her.

The officers around Cortez, and particularly Juan Jamarillo, were surprised by the offer. Jamarillo, always Marina's protector, turned to Cortez.

"This is a most improper suggestion, General!" he said darkly.

Aguilar, nearby, agreed. "Jamarillo is right," he said, watching Marina's face. "The girl can only cause difficulty."

Isabel, across the trestle table with her lover Navarro, spoke to Marina loudly. "Tell her to go to hell, where she belongs, the young heathen!"

Cortez had been regarding the youthful Linala with appreciation. He turned now to Marina. "Perhaps my officers are right."

Marina, though, shook her head firmly. "It has gone too far. You cannot refuse this most generous

offer, General. It would be an insult to Montezuma, to his daughter, and to the Aztec people." She gave Linala a grim look. "No, you must accept his gift."

Cortez sighed slightly, and glanced again at Linala. Cortez had had other Indian girls on the expedition, before Marina, and had a taste for them that had not recently been satisfied. Linala looked very good to him, at that moment, with the native liquor in him. Marina saw the look in his eyes, and was hurt by it.

"All right," Cortez told her. "Tell Montezuma that I accept his most generous gift, for myself and for my God and king."

Marina translated, and Montezuma smiled broadly, and there was much cheering around the dining hall. Montezuma then drank to the long life of Cortez and those close to him, and afterwards he and his entourage departed to allow the Spaniards to relax by themselves.

The girl Linala, even before the night was finished, had holy water sprinkled over her, and was dubbed Dona Ana, and the other Aztec women were given Christian names, too. Linala sat on Cortez' right hand through the rest of the evening, and whenever Cortez spoke to her, which was often, Marina was obliged to translate, and with each such episode, her resentment of the Aztec girl grew greater. The other Aztec women paired off with men who did not have women—all officers—and one was offered to Jamarillo, but he refused. He was gradually falling in love with Dona Marina, and no other woman interested him.

By midnight most of the newly-paired couples had gone off to private quarters, and Linala, or Dona Ana, was taken to a private room near that of

Cortez. Marina was asked to take her upstairs to these quarters, and when she and the girl were alone there for a few moments, Linala treated Marina like a servant. Marina held her temper, and went to her own room. Later, Marina felt lonely, and hearing Cortez return to his suite, she left her room in a night dress and went to his rooms. Knocking lightly outside the door, where a stony-faced sentry stood guard, she waited for Cortez' answer. In a moment he came to the door and swung it open. He was bare-chested, and smelled of liquor.

He narrowed his eyes on her for a moment as if he did not recognize her. "Oh. The fair Marina, I see."

Marina did not mind his intoxication. She wanted only to forget the differences between them, and take him to her bosom, and feel his manhood in her tonight, so that the loneliness would go away.

"I am lonely in this great city, General—Hernando. I want to be with you this night."

Cortez' face changed, and he looked embarrassed. He looked behind him, into an adjacent bedroom, and Marina looked, too. From behind a filmy curtain came Linala. She stood in the light of a brazier, and she was completely naked. Her long, black hair hung down over her shoulders, and her bronze body gleamed in the light. Marina, shocked and angry, stared hard at the girl's svelte body—the full breasts, the narrow waist, the flaring hips and bronze thighs. Linala smiled broadly at her.

"What is it, Malin girl?" she asked prettily. "You wished to serve us a drink, perhaps?"

Cortez did not understand the Nahuatl, but he saw Marina's face. "I'm afraid that I'm—occupied at the moment," he said in a low, apologetic voice. Marina just looked somberly into his eyes. "You

yourself said it," he added. "We don't want to insult the emperor so soon, isn't it true?"

For a moment, Marina could remember no Spanish to reply to him. All the words that jumbled into her head were Nahuatl, for the girl. But then she finally spoke.

"It's true, General," she said stiffly.

Cortez hesitated, then spoke again. "Marina, Captain Alvarado has acquired an affection for you that is almost equal to my own." His words were slightly slurred.

"What?" she said.

"I mean to say—the captain is a handsome man, admired by all the Spanish women. If you went to him, I'm sure he would prefer to spend the night with you, over the Aztec harem woman he was given." He grinned drunkenly. "Of course, my suggestion is for the night only. You are, after all, still my woman, Malin princess."

Marina was so angry that she could not speak. She had been ready to forgive him his brutality and arrogance, to let everything that had gone before diminish into the black past. But this new outrage was insufferable. She felt tears well into her eyes.

"*I am* a Malin princess!" she finally said to him, hoarsely, turning her hard look from him onto Linala, and then back to him. "I am the woman of him that I choose! And the last two in this garrison that I would choose, General Cortez, at this moment, would be you, or that egotistical braggart, Alvarado!" She swallowed hard, and brushed her cheek with her hand. "When you need me for business, General, please advise me!" She turned then, and hurried quickly away, leaving Cortez open-mouthed in the doorway.

For the next few days, Marina again kept her distance from Cortez, except when he needed her for official meetings with the Aztecs. In several meetings with Montezuma, Cortez introduced the tenets of Christianity to the emperor, trying by implication to advance the Christian God as a kind of successor to Quetzalcoatl, and asking for the placing of crosses atop the Great Temple and others, and for the fealty of Montezuma personally to Cortez' new God. But in these interviews, Montezuma cautiously refused to recognize a successor to Quetzalcoatl because Aztec prophecies did not suggest one, and told Cortez that although he understood that the crosses were undoubtedly only symbols to the Spaniards of a common god to all of them, nevertheless the placing of them in the temples would offend his priests and the populace, and he would not give his permission to do so, even though technically he had sworn subservience to Cortez and his god-king.

Marina noticed that Cortez grew somber and surly through these meetings, and his mood was strengthened by the blonde Pedro Alvarado, who was as arrogant and hot-headed on the Spanish side as Guatemozin was among the Aztecs. Alvarado insisted on placing the crosses by force of arms, despite the hundreds of thousands of Aztecs surrounding them in the city, and Guatemozin harangued Montezuma that Cortez was showing himself not to be a god-emissary by his suggested defiling of the temples, and that the Spaniards should now be evicted from the city, or massacred in their palace. Lord Tendile agreed with the young Guatemozin, but Montezuma listened to his priests, who still feared Cortez as a deity despite his urgings for new laws of religion and new symbols.

Then one afternoon, one of Alvarado's subordinate officers overheard a noble under Guatemozin suggest to another noble-warrior that the Spanish quarters ought to be attacked before they knuckled under to Cortez' requests. The Spaniard had learned just enough Nahuatl from Aguilar and from the locals to understand a few words of what was said, and interpreted the dialogue as a plot to massacre the Spaniards. Alvarado brought the officer to Cortez, who repeated his story to the general, and Cortez called a secret briefing session. Bernal Diaz was present at it, as were also Aguilar, Sandoval, Ordaz and Avila. Marina was not told of the meeting, and knew nothing of it.

They gathered in Cortez' office, where he sat behind a desk-table, brooding. Cortez rose when they were all there, and strode up and down the length of the room before them. A late afternoon sun slanted its rays through a window, and lay a bar of yellow across the tiled floor.

Cortez repeated the soldier's story to them. The soldier had been dismissed by Alvarado and was not present at this conference. All the officers present wore armor at Cortez' orders, because he was still defensive about being in the capital of a potential enemy, but Cortez himself was dressed in a blue tunic and breeches, and low, leather boots. A wide, brass-buckled belt was strapped at his waist, and his cavalry sword hung from it and swung slightly as he paced the room. When he finished repeating the story to them, he fell silent, and waited for their reaction.

"But surely, General," Aguilar said after a moment, "it has occurred to you that Suarez does not speak Nahuatl? At the best, he is only guessing at

what was spoken between the Aztecs. Even I would have difficulty in understanding."

Alvarado interposed hotly. "My man knows enough words to understand treachery when he hears it! Did we learn nothing at Cholula, and Tlaxcala? The Indian has a devious mind, and cannot be trusted to deal honorably with honorable soldiers! This is not Europe, gentlemen—let us not deceive ourselves. We are at the end of the world, among savages who want nothing more than our pulsing hearts to offer to their bloodthirsty gods! If we forget that, we will be doomed!" He had a harsh, rather shrill voice, and he had the habit of sticking his chin out as he became more emotionally aroused. Like Cortez, he was an athletic-looking man, and was highly skilled with the horse and the sword. Despite his womanizing along their route from the coast, he had developed a strong physical desire for the lovely Marina, and had been bold enough to ask Cortez to share her with him, and that was what had prompted Cortez to make his suggestion to Marina on that celebration night.

Alvarado's reminder of the sacrifice block cast another silence over the room, and made an uneasiness creep into their insides. Nobody talked about their potential fate as human sacrifices, because it was too terrible to discuss.

"I agree with Alvarado," Alonzo Avila commented, his arms crossed militantly across his breastplate. He was short and stocky, with a thick, black beard, and he was here for the gold, and wondered why Cortez had not already demanded all Montezuma had.

The big, heavy-set Ordaz grunted. He wore a tiny gold ring in his ear and was considered a renegade,

and he enjoyed killing. "You can't trust any of them," he said in a gravelly voice.

But tall, professorial Sandoval, beardless in his armor, sided with Aguilar. "I can't believe Montezuma would plan to attack us here. His whole demeanor suggests the opposite. I think he believes, even now, that the general is somehow an emissary of that snake-god, and he's scared to death to take any hostile action against us."

"His nephew Guatemozin isn't scared," Alvarado said loudly. "I can read his face like a book. He wants us dead. Maybe Montezuma is beginning to listen to him."

Aguilar shook his head negatively. "I think the poor devil actually likes us. I know he likes Marina. Anyway, why would he give you his daughter, and several wives, and then attack our headquarters with them here?"

"Because he's a soulless bastard who doesn't care what happens to his women!" Alvarado said loudly.

Cortez finally held his hand up to quiet them. "All right, this is getting us nowhere." He walked to the table, and sat on its edge, staring at the floor. "Aguilar is right, none of us know enough of the language to interpret conversations successfully. But I do get feelings from some of the nobles, especially Guatemozin. Are our cannon in place on the palace walls, Ordaz?"

Ordaz nodded. "Yes, General."

"All right, we'll double our guard, inside and outside the headquarters. Also, bring in some more of the Totonacs, for their safety."

"Very well, General," Sandoval replied, who was in charge of the Indian warriors.

"My plan here," Cortez went on, "is to convert

these bloody temples into Christian churches as quickly as we can, and to return Aztec gold to Madrid to excite royal interest in exploration and colonization. I can't embark on these difficult matters, though, with the threat of attack hanging over our heads here."

"Exactly!" Alvarado said.

Cortez eyed him. "But how to remove this threat? We can't successfully challenge the entire Aztec army with our depleted forces, and a paltry Indian supplement."

Alvarado's face changed, and he began to scowl.

"We would be swallowed up like a merchantman in a storm at sea," Diaz agreed.

Cortez nodded. "But there is something we *can* do. We can place the head of this Aztec octopus under our physical control."

There was a murmuring of excitement around the room.

"Arrest Montezuma?" Aguilar said incredulously.

"It seems the logical next step in our occupation of the city," Cortez replied blandly, without emotion.

"Good Lord!" Aguilar objected. "Montezuma is our only friend in this hostile and mighty nation!"

Diaz stroked his goatee. "It would be a dangerous thing to accomplish, General, even if its strategy is sound. The Aztec army fills the streets, and Montezuma is surrounded by a loyal and strong palace guard."

"We'll take our entire infantry there!" Ordaz suggested.

"And line the route there with cavalry!" Alvarado added.

"That would be insanity," Aguilar commented angrily.

"I agree," Sandoval said. "They would have ten thousand troops in the streets before we could return from the Royal Palace."

Cortez nodded again. "Yes, they would. So, instead, we will take a detachment of infantry not much larger than we usually use as guards, on our visits to the palace, and we'll depend on our personal influence over Montezuma to bring him here. And his fear of us."

"It is a suicidal plan, General," Alvarado said, "without the use of what force we have."

"It just might work," Sandoval mused.

"If it does," Cortez said, "we'll have Montezuma here where we can watch him. And we'll have a power over the Aztecs that they can't ignore. We'll have their emperor."

Aguilar was repressing strong anger. Like Marina, he already considered Montezuma a friend. "If the general please," he said bitterly, "I beg to be excused from this enterprise."

Cortez studied his face. "Very well, cousin. Your dissent does not offend us."

Aguilar turned on his heel and stormed from the room. When he had gone, Cortez sat there for a long moment, then looked up at Diaz. "There is a time in the mid-afternoon when the city is quiet, and few Aztecs are on the streets. That is when we will go."

Later, Marina was brought to Cortez, and told that there would be a meeting with the emperor, but not its purpose, and she found herself wondering about Cortez' motivations. But now he was confiding less in her than before, since the recent night he spent with Linala, when he suggested that

Marina might substitute Alvarado's company for his temporarily. Despite weak apologies the next morning, and assurances that she would always be his woman over any Aztec, Marina felt unwanted and unloved, just as she always had at Tabasco.

Later when the small contingent of armored troops marched the several city blocks to the Royal Palace, they caused no particular stir in the streets. There was twice the guard of other visits, but this raised little curiosity, even when they reached the palace. Montezuma knew of their coming, and believed Cortez wanted to discuss modification of the palace headquarters where they were billeted. The palace guard, with their javelins and knives and wood shields, were not alarmed when Cortez brought his contingent into the grand halls, their armor clanging sharply as they marched, and Montezuma was not unduly surprised when they were brought right up to the corridor outside his throne room. Cortez entered with Diaz, Alvarado and Marina, and Montezuma greeted them warmly, attended by several lords and servants.

Montezuma then resumed his seat on his gilt throne, set with precious shells and stones, and Cortez stood before him, Marina at his side and his two captains just behind him. A noble stood on either side of Montezuma, and a servant held a plumed fan over the emperor's head, where sun struck him from a doorway to the garden. Montezuma greeted Marina separately, and she felt more warmth for him than for her general, at that moment. Then Cortez began his discussion with Montezuma. He mentioned billeting briefly, and then, without further preliminary, moved to his sensitive task.

"Your majesty," he began, "it grieves me to report to you that despite your cordial hospitality toward us in your capital, there are those in your nation who plot against us and desire our misfortune."

Marina looked quickly toward Cortez, studying his somber face. Then she repeated what he had said in Nahautl, and watched Montezuma's face change, registering surprise. He asked Cortez what he referred to, and Cortez replied.

"There are certain of your nobles who speak of hostility toward us," Cortez told him. He mentioned two names, from the soldier's report. "Also, there has been a report of plotting against my skeleton force of soldiers in Cempoalla, under orders from Tenochtitlan."

Marina had heard the story from Cempoalla, but nobody at headquarters had taken it seriously. She translated, and Montezuma became very anxious and nervous.

"We are sorry for these things, Malinche," he said soberly. "But you may be sure that we personally have had no part in these goings-on, and that you have our affection and friendship."

Montezuma was telling Cortez the truth. He had effectively silenced Guatemozin, and was planning to offer Cortez a large share of the Aztec treasury for his king, in return for Cortez' promise of non-interference in Aztec matters.

"I will dispatch an army forthwith," Montezuma went on, "to handle the Cempoalla matter, if you wish it."

Cortez shook his head. "It is under control now, we think," he replied, "and your offer convinces us, your highness, of your freedom from involvement in these matters. But our great monarch across the sea

will hear of these proceedings, and not being here to see your reaction, as I am, will perhaps doubt your continued friendship and love." He paused, and continued. "It is with this situation in mind, your majesty, that I suggest a simple act of fealty on your part, that is, that you temporarily take up residence in our headquarters, placing yourself under our care until it is clear which of your lords may be our enemies, and thus also yours."

Marina stared hard at Cortez, as if he must be raving mad. "Did I understand you correctly, General?" she said, before relaying Cortez' speech to the emperor. "You're asking Montezuma to place himself in your protective custody, at your headquarters?"

Alvarado answered for Cortez. "That is exactly what he suggests," he said to her.

Marina studied Alvarado's face, and then Cortez'. "This is equivalent to an arrest of the monarch!" she said breathlessly.

"Please don't put it that way to him," Cortez replied acidly to her.

Marina was suddenly knotted up inside. "I should have been advised of your intent, General!"

Montezuma and his lords were watching the exchange anxiously.

"Is there anything wrong, Ce Malinalli?" Montezuma asked her.

"You will translate my speech to him," Cortez said grimly.

Marina's ears rang, and her heart thudded inside her. She turned to Montezuma, and slowly repeated the entirety of Cortez' speech to him, watching his face change through it. When she was finished, her eyes were moist with tears.

Montezuma was shocked, and his nobles and the several warriors who guarded the doorway and the room were outraged.

"This is preposterous!" the noble on Montezuma's right exclaimed loudly.

"Call the guards, your majesty!" the other counseled.

But Montezuma rose from his throne, descended to their level, and touched Marina's cheek with his hand, to comfort her. Then he looked into the hard eyes of Cortez.

"Such a move to the Palace of Axayacatl would make me a virtual prisoner of the Malinche and his men," he said, his cheeks flushed with fear and anger. "Why would a great prince of the Aztec nation leave his own palace to submit himself to such humiliation? And why would a friend ask it?"

There was a moment of great tension in the room as Marina tearfully translated, and Cortez listened. Then Cortez replied.

"It would not be like that, your majesty. You would not be a prisoner. You would be a voluntary guest with us until all this foolishness is cleared up, surrounded by your family and court, and would be treated with the greatest respect by us, as we have great respect and affection for you."

When Montezuma heard that, he calmed down, but was still adamant. "My people would never allow such a move on my part," he said firmly. "Even if I would accede to it."

"Ask Malinche to leave!" the young lord on Montezuma's left said loudly. "Guards!"

Two warriors at the door, excited by the noble's manner, drew their knives at their belts and rushed Cortez and his captains. Alvarado and Diaz drew

their swords quickly, and when the first man reached Alvarado, Alvarado swung the sword hard and caught the Aztec across the neck and shoulder. The warrior went down with a yell, and lay dying at Alvarado's feet. Two other warriors came running from the perimeter of the room, and Montezuma commanded them to halt. They did, and Alvarado and Diaz stood there brandishing the swords as the first warrior bled to death on the floor.

Cortez was angry at the aborted attack. Alvarado, the blood hot in him, shouted for their guard, and suddenly the room was filled with Spanish soldiers in their armor—two dozen in all—bearing crossbows.

"Now, damn it!" Alvarado said to Cortez. "Let us waste no more time on this barbarian king! Let us seize him, and if he resists, plunge our swords into his heathen body!"

"No!" Marina cried out to Cortez.

Cortez gave Montezuma a blistering look. "Tell him that he had better come with us as we suggested. For his own safety."

Marina tearfully repeated the threat, and Montezuma's face paled. He was shaking inside. He knew his palace guard could prevent their leaving with him alive, and that he had an army on the streets outside. But Cortez terrified him.

"All right," he said almost inaudibly to Marina. "Tell Malinche I will go with him."

"No, you must not!" the young noble cried out. "It is better for an Aztec king to leave his life on this palace floor!"

But Montezuma was beaten. His fear of Cortez had broken him. Moments later he was escorted from the palace by Spanish armed guards, and

walked to the Spanish headquarters under the incredulous stares of the few citizens in the street. The palace guard made no attempt to stop the entourage, because Montezuma seemed to be going with the Spaniards peaceably.

By sunset on that black day, Montezuma had been situated in the other royal suite at the Spanish headquarters, with his servants and Netoza and his royal court, and his astonished daughter Linala was allowed to visit him.

But surrounding him on all sides were Spanish soldiers and Spanish cannon, and the hostile faces of his traditional Totonac and Tlaxcalan enemies.

Montezuma was a prisoner in his own powerful city.

And in her private room, Marina cried alone, and wondered what would become of all of them. For this was surely an omen of coming evil to the Spaniards, and herself.

The great Montezuma was humbled.

It was as though the sun had fallen from the sky.

Chapter Seven

When Guatemozin heard of Montezuma's arrest and imprisonment at Spanish headquarters, he would not believe it, and when he believed it, he flew into a rage so acute that he fractured a finger in his right hand, slamming it into a stone wall in the Royal Palace. He convened the royal council of lords, and recommended an immediate attack on Spanish headquarters, and they were of a mind to heed this advice, but a majority insisted they communicate with Montezuma first, to get his reaction. When several lords were allowed, under Spanish guard, to visit with Montezuma, however, Montezuma insisted that they take no immediate action. Under the watchful eye of Cortez, Montezuma felt impelled to report that he was being treated well, which was true, and that he did not want any bloodshed because of the incident. If they would be patient, he insisted, this would all work out peaceably, and the Spaniards would soon be gone.

When Guatemozin heard this, he declared the emperor a traitor to Anahuac, and attempted to get approval of the council to go over Montezuma's head, to lay siege to the Spanish quarters, but he fell short of majority approval of the council. The man in the street was with Guatemozin, though, and there

were demonstrations and stone-throwing outside the Spanish palace, and clashes in the streets with Totonacs and Tlaxcalans encamped there.

Cortez was not fazed. He knew that Montezuma was still emperor, that he wielded much power and influence with his people, and Cortez had his thumb on him. So, over the next few days after the arrest, in that November of 1519, Cortez met with Montezuma often, with Marina present, and discussed sending the Spanish king an ample offering of Montezuma's goodwill from the royal treasury, to convince Charles that Montezuma was still his friend.

Cortez was, in effect, asking ransom for an emperor. But it went further than that. Cortez did not have any intention of ever restoring complete freedom to Montezuma. He hoped, instead, that when reinforcements finally came from Spain and Cuba, Cortez himself would head up a substitute government in Tenochtitlan that would give power to Spaniards over Aztecs, and destroy all evidence of the bloody religion they now practiced.

But the general still held a jaguar by the tail. Montezuma was not Anahuac, and Anahuac was aroused by this outrageous action of the Spaniards. And, five days after Montezuma's arrest, Cortez' problems multiplied in a way that he had not foreseen, and from another source: his own countrymen in Cuba.

Governor Velasquez of Cuba had become Cortez' enemy, for personal reasons, and had never acquiesced in Cortez' expedition, or given his sanction to it. Now a messenger came from Cempoalla, saying that a second expedition had landed at San Juan de Ulua, headed by a General

Narvaez, and that Velazquez had sent the expedition to pre-empt the authority of Cortez' mission, and take over from Cortez in the name of the crown.

Cortez was dispirited by this untimely bad news. Just as he was trying to get things under control in Tenochtitlan against severe odds, he now had a problem of even greater importance. If Narvaez got the Indians behind him at Cempoalla and elsewhere, with several hundred new Spanish troops to lead them, Cortez' position in the New World might be lost to him.

It was just a couple of hours after his receipt of this news, with him alone in his suite, that Marina came to Cortez to ask a favor for Montezuma. Darkness had just fallen outside, and Cortez sat on a chair at his long desk-table, deep in thought, when Marina arrived. He looked up at her vacantly.

"Ah, Marina. Do you still bring messages from the emperor?"

She nodded curtly. "It seems that no one else will. He requests several more servants from the Royal Palace, including his favorite chef and a masseur. What shall I tell him?"

Cortez shrugged. "Let him have them." He was staring at the floor again.

Marina nodded, and started to leave. But then she turned back. "Is there something I can get for you, General?"

Cortez looked up at her. "Velazquez has sent another expedition out. To override my authority here."

Marina's brow furrowed. She walked over to him, where he sat in the light of table candles. Outside in the courtyard, she could hear the sound of soft laughter from soldiers. They did not know, yet.

Nobody did, except Cortez and Diaz.

"You will be relieved of command?" she asked quietly, but with shock in her voice.

Cortez met her gaze. "Narvaez says he has authority from the crown, but I doubt it. He has shown no evidence of such to my men in Cempoalla. He has placed them in confinement, until such time as I surrender my troops to him."

Marina felt a hollowness inside her such as she had never experienced before. A threat to Cortez' authority was unthinkable to her, despite her differences with him. It was as incredible an idea to her as the humiliation of Montezuma had been. She recalled her feeling, when Montezuma had been arrested, that that was an ill omen for all of them.

"Will this Narvaez come here to Tenochtitlan?" she said.

Cortez grunted in his throat. "If I let him get this far, it will be too late. No, I must go to him."

"You will leave the city?"

He nodded. "I'll have to return to Cempoalla. I've written Narvaez a letter, telling him that it would be a shame if Spaniards end fighting Spaniards, after all we've accomplished here. I've offered to share leadership with him, if he can produce a royal commission. But I know he cannot."

"But what about your headquarters here?"

"I'll take about two-thirds of my Spanish force—a couple of hundred men—and leave the rest here, with our Indian allies, to guard this headquarters and the emperor. Alvarado will be left in charge, and I ask you to serve him loyally in my absence."

"Why Alvarado?" Marina asked hostilely.

"Because he will defend this position most rigorously," Cortez told her, "and because he is the

least likely officer I have to be taken in by Aztec trickery."

"I dislike Alvarado immensely," she admitted openly to him.

"As much as you currently dislike me?"

He held her gaze, and she finally looked away.

"There will be several other officers here, including Jamarillo, who will be personally in charge of your welfare, and of that of the other Spanish women," he went on. "Some Totonacs and Tlaxcalans have been murdered in our camp outside the palace, since Montezuma agreed to allow us a place of worship atop his Great Temple, so I am forbidding you to leave the palace grounds. Do you understand?"

Marina looked at him quizzically. There were times when she doubted he had any affection for her. And yet, there were moments like this, when he was obviously concerned for her safety.

"Yes, General. I understand."

"Dona Isabel is going to teach you chess while I'm gone," he continued. "When I return, I'll expect you to beat me a few games."

Marina started to smile, and caught herself. "Maybe you would prefer that the girl Linala learned."

Cortez made a soft sound in his throat. "Occasionally my appetite for women increases dramatically, and a new face attracts me. That is the way it is with me, my Marina, and the way it will be. But I maintain my affection for you. You are my woman, even more so than my Spanish wife in Cuba. The Dona Ana is a child and an Aztec, and I don't trust any of them. She means nothing to me."

Marina looked deep into his eyes, then dropped

her gaze. "It is not your attraction to Linala—Dona Ana—that troubles me, General. It is your lack of respect for the dignity of these people, and the vindictiveness you exhibit against them. The bloody massacre at Cholula, and now the arrest of Montezuma. You seem to have a hatred for us, deep inside you, that is unknown in this world—*my* world. Montezuma was your friend, yet you destroyed him completely in one afternoon. He no longer has the respect or affection of his people, and he languishes like a sick man in the imprisonment you have made for him. Release him, General, and allow him to save some dignity, before Anahuac rises up and swallows us in its bloody maw!"

Cortez was regarding her with incredulity. "Turn the emperor loose now, without his friendship, and at a time when I must absent myself from his capital, leaving our defenses to a weakened force!" He suddenly threw his head back and laughed loudly, filling the room with its throaty sound. Marina's cheeks blazed, and her anger at him returned.

"I'm surprised by the suggestion, Marina," he said finally, still grinning at her broadly. "Excuse my levity, but your solution is ill-advised, I'm afraid. Montezuma is treated well—I wonder how I would fare as *his* prisoner?—and his presence here gives me leverage with his government that we need for our very survival. With our close counsel, he has approved a chapel atop the Great Temple itself, and we have opened a dialogue with him concerning his personal conversion. If Montezuma were in the Royal Palace, could we have accomplished this progress?"

Marina regarded him darkly. "Your progress is illusory, my general. It is all with a weak and

confused prince, not with the Aztec people. They will resist a change in their religion with their life-blood. They are not Totonacs, or Tlaxcalans."

"No," Cortez said rather pompously, "but they have only the Devil and his demons on their side, and we have our holy God. You must keep faith, Marina, that He will not desert us."

Marina did not know how to answer that appeal. She turned bleakly away from him.

"But let us not argue on the eve of my departure," he added then, in a softer voice.

She glanced at him. "You leave for Cempoalla tomorrow?"

"There can be no delay. My rival will soon march against me." His mood had changed, and he looked very tired, and harassed. "Will you bid me farewell, in the morning?"

She paused. She had promised herself, and made it known to him, since the episode with Linala, that she wanted only a master-servant relationship with him. She had not been intimate with him since Cholula, and she did not intend to be, again.

"Yes," she said at last. "I'll be there, when you leave."

He nodded. The pomposity and arrogance were gone again, and his face looked almost innocent to her. "Good," he said.

She turned and walked to the corridor door, and when she got there, he stopped her with one last remark.

"As for the Aztec emperor," he said somberly.

She turned back to him. "Yes?"

"For the record, I never considered him a friend. And it was not I who engineered his humiliation. He accomplished that himself."

Marina considered that for a moment. He was good with words, and he often confused her with them, although she now understood Spanish well. Without replying, she turned and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Out in the corridor, she leaned heavily against the door jamb, and the guard down the hall studiously ignored her. She felt very empty inside, very lonely again. Then she heard his voice, from behind the door. He was speaking in a heavy montone, alone in his suite.

"Oh, Heavenly Father," his deep voice came to her, "I ask that You bless our imminent journey with Your infinite mercy and grace. Give our soldiers courage to endure this additional burden placed on them, and our captains the strength to set them a noble example, and my humble self the wisdom to lead them in the right directions. We are beset by enemies on all sides, Holy Father, but our faith in You does not diminish, and with Your divine guidance, we will prevail, and lead the savage into Your holy light."

When Cortez' voice was silent again, there were tears on Marina's cheeks, and her lower lip was trembling. Suddenly she turned and opened the door again, and moved through it.

Cortez was still sitting where she had left him; the candle-light flickering on his somber, handsome face, his beard glinting in its soft ambience. He stood, and faced her.

"You didn't leave," he said.

"I—heard you. Outside the door."

"Ah."

Marina unbuckled the belt at her waist, and removed it, and then she was pulling the long

Spanish dress over her head. It fell to the floor, and she stood nude before him. She had closed the door behind her again, and they were alone.

"You need me tonight," she said.

He nodded. "Yes."

She came over to him, and her body moved beautifully in the soft light. She stood very close to him, and looked up into his eyes.

"I want you. Badly."

Cortez reached out for her, and brought her softness against him, and he could feel the sudden heat of her through his tunic. His hands moved gently over her curved backside, and the swell of her belly, and the full mounds of her breasts.

"I knew you would return to me, my Malin princess!" he said, touching her lips and her throat with his mouth.

"Oh, Hernando!" she gasped harshly.

"Holy Mary and Jesus!" he breathed raggedly into her ear. "You make me burn inside!"

"I cannot help myself," her voice whispered to him in sweet urgency, "I am yours. Whatever course you take—however you want it to be with us. My heart is bonded to yours forever, my bold and beautiful conqueror!"

"Your touch is like the sun at midnight," he said hoarsely, filling his hands with her rich curves. "Your breath is the aromatic zephyr of the *tierra caliente*."

"Ravish me as you have ravished Anahuac," she demanded with breathless anticipation, her fiery body pressed against his swollen groin, her hips now undulating insistently, reaching for him.

This time they did not reach the bed. His passion was so greatly aroused, and his fever for her so

uncontrollable, that he mounted her on a rug before the long table, ripping his breeches off frantically, and then plunging between her bronze thighs, thrusting into the hot hungry dampness of her. Her bronze hips met the iron-hard, throbbing pulsation of him wantonly, abandoning herself to the savagery of his attack, her calves pressing into his muscular back, pulling him deeper and deeper into her, wanting him to fill her completely, relentlessly. And for the first time, she heard a low growling start in the depths of his throat, like some wild animal attempting to get loose, and she knew that she had heard it before, when he had swung his sword, wild-eyed, at Cholula. But as the animal-sound rose in him, she did not care about Cholula, or what it was that was clawing its way out of him now, and into that place behind his eyes. She only knew the brutal ecstasy of his manhood in her, and the powerful musk of him in her nostrils, and the driving fullness of him as they climaxed in fierce and torrid union.

Chapter Eight

By mid-morning, Cortez was gone.

With him rode all his cavalry, and most of his infantry.

Aztecs lined the streets to see them depart, and watched silently from pirogue boats on Lake Texcoco, and peered darkly from behind stucco walls.

A new mood came over the glistening city.

There was a relaxation of tension that was almost palpable. The capital breathed more freely again. It was as if the Aztec sun had come out from behind a dark cloud.

But for the Spaniards and their Indian allies encamped within the mighty metropolis, the mood was just the opposite. With every hour that passed on that first day of his departure, everyone in the Spanish contingent was acutely aware that the hard core of their fighting force was putting more and more miles between themselves and those they left behind.

For the first time since the expedition began, the Spaniards themselves were now physically split into two.

For those guarding the Spanish headquarters in Cortez' absence, it was a sobering thought.

Marina felt a terrible emptiness inside her through that first day. It seemed as if she could feel the miles pulling her further and further from Cortez, and the dread inside her that she had known on Montezuma's arrest—the feeling that that had been an ill omen for the Spaniards—came back to her strongly now, and she did not know if she felt it for Cortez' march to Cempoalla and his confrontation with Narvaez, or for the contingent that remained in Tenochtitlan.

Dona Isabel's captain of cavalry had left with Cortez, so she was lonely, too, and she and Marina spent most of the day together, conjecturing on the import of the rival expedition. Isabel predicted darkly that a new, fresh army of Spaniards would be too strong to challenge, even for Cortez, and that he might very well lose his leadership to Narvaez, and then there was no knowing what direction the Spanish invasion of Anahuac might take.

Uncertainty and fear hung in the air.

Alvarado now strode arrogantly about the palace, placing heavy guards on its perimeter, shouting commands, and making noises like a colonial dictator. On one occasion that afternoon, Marina caught him eyeing her hungrily, so she kept well away from him. She did not want any trouble from him during Cortez' absence.

The girl Linala, now called Dona Ana by the Spaniards, was allowed to maintain her quarters in the Spanish officers' wing of the headquarters palace, and wrongfully believed herself to be a wife of Cortez. But she felt no wifely affection for him. Like her cousin Guatemozin, she wanted her father restored to the Royal Palace, and felt that this time of Cortez' absence presented an excellent opportuni-

ty to effect that restoration by force.

On the evening of Cortez' departure, Linala visited the Royal Palace, under Spanish guard and without Montezuma's knowledge, and spoke privately with Tendile and Guatemozin, suggesting that they now demand her father's release. But Guatemozin was less interested in the freedom of Montezuma now, whom he considered a weakling and traitor, than with the possible destruction of the remaining Spanish force. They argued, and Linala returned to Spanish headquarters with little accomplished. When she arrived back at her room, Marina met her in the corridor by accident. She already knew that Linala had been to the Royal Palace.

"Ah, Princess Linala," she said curtly. "I see you've been visiting." She glanced past Linala to her two Spanish bodyguards, who had accompanied her to her room.

Linala waved them away, and turned to her doorway. "You take notice of many things, Malinche," she said haughtily. "I need a brazier for my room. Please bring me one." She entered her room, leaving the door open.

Marina had been putting up with Linala's childish arrogance ever since her arrival at Spanish headquarters, and now she decided there was no further necessity for it.

She followed Linala into her room, which was dimly lighted with one brazier. Linala had unfastened the upper part of her cotton dress, and let it fall to her waist, before she realized Marina had come in behind her. She turned then, nude to her belt, her high, full breasts exposed to the soft light. Her face registered mild irritation when she saw Marina. Marina closed the door behind her, for privacy.

"I asked you to get a brazier. Can't you follow simple instructions?" Linala said arrogantly.

Marina studied her sleek, long hair in the dim light, and the pouty lips, and the young breasts, and forgave Cortez' momentary hunger for her.

"I have served you, Linala, because you are a guest in this headquarters," Marina said deliberately. "Not because you are a princess. I am also of noble blood, and a free Christian woman. I do not do menial work for the Spaniards, nor for the Aztecs."

Linala frowned petulantly. "You deny fealty to an Aztec princess? The legitimate daughter of Montezuma II?"

Marina was expressionless. "My fealty is to Cortez' God and his king, and I serve only Cortez."

"Cortez is my husband," Linala said with satisfaction.

Marina felt anger push into her chest. "Foolish girl, he is the husband of a woman in Cuba, across the sea! And I am his mistress! Do you understand what that makes you?"

Linala shouted her reply. "*I am Montezuma's daughter! And you would do well never to forget it, Malin woman!*"

When Marina spoke again, it was in a low, deliberate manner. "You are also a Guatemozin spy!" she said, holding Linala's hard gaze.

Linala's dark eyes widened in shock. "How dare you!"

"Your alleged mission tonight was to see Lord Tendile, but you also spoke with Guatemozin. Do you plot against us so soon after Cortez' leaving?"

Linala's face changed color, telling Marina that she had hit a nerve. "I am a wife of Cortez, I do not

plot against my god-king. You lie against me, Malin! I will speak to the Lord Alvarado about this, and you will be punished!"

Marina regarded her somberly. "You may fool Alvarado, princess, with your flashing eyes and comely figure. But I will be watching you, in our general's absence." She turned and walked away, toward the door.

"The great Montezuma will hand you over to our priests, for these threats to me!" Linala hurled after her.

But Marina did not respond to that threat, even though it struck a note of fear deep inside her. She had done what she felt she had to, in her attempt to keep the peace in Cortez' absence. She left Linala's room without further comment.

Linala did not make good her threat to go to Montezuma or Alvarado, of course. Her interest was in keeping her business secret. She did go to Montezuma, though, as a messenger from Guatemozin, two days later, to feel Montezuma out concerning his attitude about a possible ultimatum to the Spanish regarding his release, or, in the alternative, a plan to attack and overwhelm the Spaniards in Cortez' absence. Montezuma, though, still did not want to court trouble that would endanger his life and the safety of his court, so he sent a message to Guatemozin that they should do nothing until they found out what happened to Cortez at Cempoalla.

That was the last communication Guatemozin tried to make with Montezuma. The question was no longer one of Montezuma's freedom—except as his imprisonment reflected adversely on the dignity of the Aztec nation—but whether the weakened

Spanish forces and their Indian allies could be readily overwhelmed in an attack on Spanish headquarters. Guatemozin knew the answer to be affirmative, but with Montezuma still vacillating, he found little support in the ranks of Aztec nobles, including Cuitlahua, Montezuma's brother and first in line to the throne before Guatemozin. Consequently, when Linala returned to the Royal Palace the day following her report concerning Montezuma's order to do nothing, she found Guatemozin in a black mood. Her guards allowed her privacy with her cousin in a palace room, despite Alvarado's warnings to watch all Aztecs closely, and they discussed the situation openly.

"If you come with further words of weakness from your father, cousin Linala," Guatemozin said darkly to her, "I am not interested in hearing them."

She stuck her chin out. She was dressed in a filmy dress that revealed much of her bronze body underneath it. "I do not come for the emperor, but for myself."

Guatemozin had been exercising beside a sunlit window. He came now over to her, his torso bare to the waist, his body glistening softly with a fine dew of perspiration. He wore only a brief loin-cloth and sandals. He was a muscular, athletic-looking warrior in the prime of his youth.

"Is it a personal visit then?" he grinned at her. He cupped a hand over her right breast and moved it on the soft flesh. "Take the garment off, and give me pleasure, Princess."

She removed his hand. "I am not a court plaything, dear cousin, as you seem to think." She smelled the odor of him, and liked it. "I have my mind on things political, just as you do." She walked

a few feet away and leaned against a stucco wall, facing him.

Guatemozin came over near her again. "Women do not make good politicians. Even Montezuma understands that."

"I live in the Spanish quarters," she said imperiously. "That makes me a good politician!"

Guatemozin grunted.

"I know where the Sun sleeps, and how he moves about," she said, referring to Alvarado, who had been given the nickname by Aztec lords, because of his yellow hair and beard. "If I wish, I can go to his bed. At an appropriate time."

Guatemozin regarded her more seriously. "If we could get to the officers," he said wishfully, "it would all be over. They all sleep near Cortez' suite, don't they?"

"All of them," she said. "I know the room of each of them. If you could get support from the army, I could direct you to a successful attack on their garrison."

"Because of your father," Guatemozin said angrily, "support from my brethren is almost nonexistent."

"Talk to more of them," she urged. "Find those with anger in their hearts. We would not need complete support of the council."

He looked into her eyes. She was surely different from her father.

"In the meantime, there is a real danger to us in the Spanish quarters," she went on. "The Malin woman they call Marina."

"Hmmp! Can she shoot a thunder-weapon?"

"She does not have to. She speaks fluent Nahuatl, and she spies on us for them. She must be gotten rid

of, before we can proceed seriously with any plan of attack against them."

"Gotten rid of?" he said.

"Servants come and go between the Royal Palace and Spanish headquarters. We will substitute two warriors, and they will kill her in her sleep."

Guatemozin shook his handsome head. "That would warn the Spaniards of our aggressive intent."

Linala reached to his loin-cloth, and parted the folds with her hand, and took him in her long fingers. She smiled slightly, massaging him with a gentle touch, until he was big and throbbing in her grasp.

"The Totonacs and Tlaxcalans who serve the Spaniards dislike the Malin, some of them," she told him. "I would report seeing one of them come from her room, after the deed was done. No guilt would affix to us."

He was no longer very interested in her plot, with her hand caressing him. "I—don't know," he said.

She released him as his breathing became shallow, unfastened her dress at the waist, and raised it over her head. The full breasts came up nicely with the movement, and Guatemozin was staring hungrily at them, and the svelte hips, and the dark place between her thighs that looked so inviting. She leaned against the wall, and took him into her. She felt him fill her with his hardness. She ran her hands over his muscular back as they stood there joined.

"Will you do it for me?" she breathed into his ear.

Guatemozin was already moving in her. "Yes," he said hoarsely. "It will be done."

Linala smiled then and made passionate love to his cousin against that firm wall, pressing her warm flesh between its hardness and his own. Their bronze

bodies glowed in the soft sunlight, and Linala's soft animal sounds filled the silence of the room. At climax there was an uneven gasping from his throat, and a scratching of her manicured nails across his ribs, and a fury of hot plunging. Then they both leaned against the wall, exhausted, and Linala knew that she had given good consideration for his promise. He would do what she wanted, now, and if nothing else came from it, she would be rid of the damnable Malin woman.

That in itself would give her satisfaction enough.

The very next day, Linala took steps to put her plot against Marina into operation. While Guatemozin was recruiting two warriors to pose as servants from the Royal Palace, Linala went to an assistant of Alvarado and asked if Marina might be moved out of the officers' quarters and into quarters with the Indian servants, in a wing of the palace. She gave as her reason that she wanted a couple of the Aztec harem women near her, who were sleeping with Spanish officers, and that Marina's room would suit nicely. But her real purpose was to separate Marina from the officers, and put her into a more vulnerable part of the headquarters.

When Alvarado heard of the request, he called Marina into Cortez' office, which he now temporarily occupied, and told her of it. As he spoke, she noted that he seemed to be enjoying her small discomfort, and she was doubly angered.

"I myself thought the suggestion not entirely unreasonable," Alvarado grinned slightly at her, from behind Cortez' desk. "Dona Ana asks favors only for the royal harem, and their welfare is certainly important to Montezuma."

Marina held her temper, and tried to speak calmly. "The emperor would not wish this," she said curtly to him. "The princess called Ana does this to humiliate me, and you relay her request to me for the same purpose, Captain Alvarado!"

His eyebrows went up, and he stroked his blonde beard. "Surely making false accusations will not help your case, Malin woman."

"I need nothing to help my case," she said hotly. "Move me if you will, Captain, while you still have the power. When the general returns, he will decide whether you have exercised good judgment."

Alvarado's cheeks flushed slightly, and his eyes flashed his own anger. "You already know Spanish too well, Indian maiden!"

"Perhaps," she said flatly.

"I am in charge of this garrison," he said loudly, "and I expect to be treated as such by you, regardless of your relationship in bed with our general!"

She caught her breath. "Men are treated according to their merit," she said.

Alvarado rose from his chair quickly. "You are a presumptuous savage!" he said loudly. "I could have you moved out to the street, to camp with the primitive Tlaxcalans, if I wished! Maybe you would prefer that?"

She met his hard gaze calmly. "I believe it does not matter what I prefer, Captain, since you are in charge."

He slowly calmed down. Coming around the long table, he walked over to her. "You don't like me," he said.

She shrugged.

"Maybe it would pay for you to show a little—affection."

She saw his glance drop from her face to where the dress clung tightly to her bosom. "I don't understand," she lied.

"Yes, you do," Alvarado told her. "If you were to quietly take yourself to my room tonight, for example, this whole matter of Dona Ana's request could be disposed of very quickly in your favor."

Marina's face was flushed as she replied. "I am not a camp harlot, Captain! I am Cortez' woman!"

He made a face. "The general would not mind."

"That's a lie!" she said loudly to him, wondering if she were right. She whirled and ran to the door, then turned back to him when she got there.

"Do what you want to me! But I'll never come voluntarily to your bed!"

She hurriedly left the room then, leaving Alvarado standing there grim-faced.

Later that same day, Jamarillo came to Marina, at her room, and he had been sent by Alvarado. He was somber-countenanced as he entered at her invitation, but he had a bit of good news for her.

"Alvarado talked to me about the possibility of moving you to the Indian quarters," he said quietly. "Because Cortez left you and the other women in my personal charge. I told him Cortez would be outraged, and he believed me. You'll stay where you are."

Marina stood in the middle of the room near him. He was off-duty, and was not wearing his armor. She came over to him and embraced him warmly. "Oh, thank you, Juan. Once again you come to my rescue! What would I do without you?"

Jamarillo, feeling her pressed against him, was flustered and tongue-tied. His infatuation with Marina was growing with every day he knew her. His

young, dark-bearded face was full of emotion suddenly, and his innocent eyes shone bright with affection for her.

"Do you—really mean that, Marina?" he said, as he held her.

She returned his serious gaze. "Why, yes, Juan."

He held onto her, not wanting to let go. "I have great—affection for you, Dona Marina."

Marina studied his face more closely, and saw for the first time how he felt. She released him, and stepped slightly away, embarrassed now. Jamarillo was a handsome young fellow, and she genuinely liked him, even more than Aguilar, and he had, after all, saved her life at San Juan de Ulua aboard ship. But she was Cortez' woman, and Marina was incapable of feeling really deeply for more than one man.

"I have affection for you, Juan Jamarillo," she said softly, avoiding his eyes.

"I think I mean it differently from you."

She nodded. "Possibly."

"Every time I see you, I want to take you into my arms," he blurted out.

She met his anxious gaze. "Oh, Juan! You know that my love is bound to your general."

He sighed heavily. "Yes. I understand."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "But remember, always, my feelings for you, Malin princess, as this expedition progresses to one conclusion or another."

"I will, dear Juan."

He smiled, and changed the subject. "Do you anticipate any real trouble from Dona Ana—Linala?"

Marina shrugged. "She despises me. I think she believes I am an interference with her power over the general."

"Is there danger from her?" he suggested.

"I don't see how, since I'm surrounded by Cortez' troops," Marina replied.

"You would have been more vulnerable, if her request to move you had been approved," he said somberly.

That thought had not even occurred to Marina. She furrowed her brow, now. "Yes," she said slowly.

"I never liked the idea of having Aztecs—even women—in our quarters," Jamarillo admitted. "And I particularly mistrust this daughter of the emperor. Marina, would you mind if Isabel moved in with you, until the return of the general?"

"Why, no. Not at all. Dona Isabel and I are the best of friends," she said.

"There might be more safety, with two of you together," he said. "Also, I'll alert our guards on this floor to watch for trouble."

"Very well, Juan," Marina said. "Oh, I meant to ask. Is there any word from the general?"

He shook his head. "No, but he ought to be there about now. God help his enterprise, if Narvaez is stubborn."

"Yes," Marina said to herself.

Jamarillo turned and walked to her door, then spoke again from there. "I'll keep a close watch over you, Princess. You have my solemn word."

She smiled tenderly. "I know, Juan."

Later that same day, Linala received a secret message from Guatemozin that his agents were in place in the Spanish headquarters, and even though

Marina still occupied her same room in the officers' quarters, the attempt on her life would be made that very night.

Linala did not know that Isabel would be with Marina, nor that Jamarillo was alerted to any danger, so she sent no reply to her cousin, and the plot went forward. The two warriors acting as shuttle-servants to Montezuma were to take their emperor a special garment he had requested on the previous day, and then, upon leaving him, they were to overwhelm the guard that stood sentry between Montezuma's suite and the officers' quarters, go directly to Marina's room, and kill her, then making their escape before discovery. Montezuma would know nothing of it, nor would anyone else except for Guatemozin, Linala, two lords loyal to Guatemozin, and the warriors who would commit the murder.

It was almost midnight that night when it all happened. Marina and Isabel lay in their darkened room, on separate pallet-beds, talking in the darkness. Marina had expressed her fears about the safety of Cortez' expedition to Cempoalla, and Isabel, light-hearted as usual, was reassuring her.

"He will be all right," she said, lying there facing Marina, only a few feet away. The only light in the room came through a high window, from the brazen moon overhead outside. Isabel lay in a bar of its cool light, nude, as she rarely slept with a night dress. "They will all be all right."

Marina sighed. Her long, sleek hair fanned out beside her head on a pillow. "I wish I could be certain of that." She turned to Isabel. "These are not Totonacs they go to challenge, dear friend, but other countrymen of yours. I am afraid."

Isabel nodded, moving the pallet, and her skin

was pale in the moonlight in comparison with that of Marina. "I understand. But I'll tell you a secret about your general," she said conspiratorially. "He is not an ordinary Spaniard, not even among generals and politicians. He is a fearsome man, and this General Narvaez had better beware, if he causes trouble."

"I hope you're right, dear Isabel."

"Of course I am. I have the feeling strong inside me that Cortez will return triumphant, and we will be reunited in renewed strength, and all of us will celebrate our new victory over the forces of evil."

"Really?" Marina said.

"I promise to toast your happy future, with you and your general!" Isabel smiled easily. "We will—"

She paused, and silence fell in the room.

"Did you hear something?" Isabel asked.

Marina nodded. "It sounded as if someone were outside the door. Maybe I should get up and—"

But she never finished. In the next instant, the door crashed inward, splintering, and two Aztec warriors stood in its dim opening.

"Oh!" Marina gasped softly.

"Jesus and Mary!" Isabel exclaimed.

The two of them were muscular, thickly-built young men, wearing only loin-cloths and plumed head-dresses that hid their faces. They both carried long, bronze knives with decorated handles, and they stood in menacing poses just inside the doorway.

"Who are you?" Isabel said in a suddenly hoarse voice.

"They're Aztecs," Marina gasped out.

Now the tallest of the two lunged toward Marina's bed, which was furthest from the door, and the other

husky warrior went for Isabel, only a few steps away. They had not expected Isabel, but they knew that they had to kill both women, now. The stocky one reached Isabel's bed quickly, with a wild gurgling in his throat, and Isabel rolled onto her back, her nakedness glistening in the moonlight.

"No, damn you!" she yelled at him as he raised the knife over her. Then she screamed as he plunged it into her abdomen. Her eyes saucered in shock as the cold metal entered her, and a low gasping sound came from her lips.

In the next second, the taller warrior slashed down toward Marina with his long, sharp-edged knife. But in that moment she rolled desperately toward the far wall, away from him, and when the knife descended, it missed her flesh, ripping into the bedding, and tearing at her nightdress.

In that instant when the warrior was off-balance, Marina sprang to her feet on the far side of the pallet, and stumbled against the wall at the corner there, gasping in terror.

The tall warrior made an ugly sound in his throat. "*Damn you, Malin woman!*" he hissed out. Then he came over the bed, behind the frightening mask, which resembled a bird of prey, with feathers and a brightly-painted beak.

At Isabel's bed, the other warrior withdrew the knife from Isabel's stomach, then stabbed it again, into her throat this time, cutting deeply. Blood was everywhere. Isabel's naked thigh jumped on the crimson-spotted bedding, and her hand moved toward the new wound in her throat, and then it was over for her.

The tall warrior confronting Marina now stabbed at Marina's right breast, as she huddled in the

corner. He struck fiercely, with all his strength behind the blow, wanting to kill her quickly now. But again she twisted away in desperation, and the knife grazed her flesh just slightly, and then its sharp point thudded into the wall behind her.

The tall warrior uttered an obscenity in Nahautl, and closed in on Marina, grabbing her throat with his left hand. He then raised the knife above her head, to plunge into her throat.

Behind him, though, came the sound of running in the corridor, and Spanish armor clanking. He and the other warrior both turned at the same instant, and as they did, Juan Jamarillo and a corridor guard appeared in the doorway, wide-eyed and angry.

"*Damn!*" Jamarillo yelled.

Jamarillo brandished a sword, and the Spanish soldier-guard carried a crossbow. They took in the scene at a glance, and then Jamarillo saw that Marina was still alive. He started for the tall warrior, but the guard beat him. He raised the crossbow and aimed from waist level as the Aztec turned to finish Marina off. He poised the knife before her throat, but then the arrow was released with a dull *twang* and it cut through the blackness and buried itself in the Aztec's back. He grunted in shock, clutched at Marina's nightdress, and tore it down the front as he slipped to the floor.

The other warrior now lunged at Jamarillo, wild-eyed, but Jamarillo met him with a thrusting sword-point in the chest, and the weapon cracked two ribs and ruptured internal organs as it violated his insides. He was stopped in mid-stride, grabbing at the hard metal, and then he fell beside the bed where Isabel lay.

Marina was sobbing in the dark corner, and

Jamarillo went to her, and held her close to him. She sobbed uncontrollably on his shoulder as the guard went and looked at Isabel, then shook his head.

"Is she—?" Marina could not finish the question.

"I'm afraid so, Marina," Jamarillo said heavily.

"Oh, no!" she gasped out. "My dear, dear Isabel!"

"I'm—sorry," Jamarillo said to her. "We came as soon as we heard the scream. They killed a guard to get here."

"Oh," she said weakly.

"You have a cut on your side," he said. "There is blood on your gown. Please. Sit down here."

"I'll be all right, Juan," she said faintly.

She took one step toward the pallet-bed, saw Isabel's body clearly in the soft moonlight, and collapsed unconscious at Jamarillo's feet.

Chapter Nine

Cortez' tough little army was encamped just outside Cempoalla.

Cortez had sent another note to Narvaez, exhorting that rival general to show authority from the crown for his claim to lead the Mexican expedition, but had not gotten a reply. Narvaez was an arrogant, garrulous man who had never met Cortez, did not believe the tall tales of his exploits that had been received in Havana, and considered him a young upstart with no real military ability.

In short, he did not know his adversary.

Sensing that Narvaez was going to force a showdown, Cortez had already begun, despite his outnumbered force, to prepare the way for a military confrontation. Displaying his knowledge of men that had served him so well at the destruction of his fleet, he had instructed his messengers to Narvaez to mingle with Narvaez' officers and troops before returning to the Cortez camp, and fill them with stories of riches in Tenochtitlan, already at the disposal of Cortez, and which would have to be fought for, under any other leader. These stories had the desired effect, and many of Narvaez' troops wondered whether they were serving the wrong man.

On that second night in camp outside the Totonac

capital, Cortez had already managed to weaken his enemy without ever having fired a shot at him. And when one of his messengers returned that evening with a long-awaited reply from Narvaez, it did not bother Cortez that it was a negative one. He and Bernal Diaz sat outside at a fire, and listened calmly to the message from Alonzo Avila.

"Narvaez says that you must take his word for his authority from the crown," Avila said in his throaty voice, squat and stocky in his gleaming armor. "He says that in any event, he does not need such direct authority, since he acts under the governorship of Hispaniola at Havana, and you are here without authority."

"The impudent rascal!" Diaz grunted.

"I knew it," Cortez said seriously. "I knew he had no real commission from the crown. Charles is not going to play favorites, when the only gold he has received is from me."

"He treated me like a *peon*," Avila grumbled. "He finished his ridiculous message by demanding the surrender of your troops to him, as early as is convenient tomorrow."

"Damn!" Diaz exclaimed. "The arrogance!"

Cortez was not ruffled, though. "What about his strength?" he asked Avila. "Do you confirm previous reports?"

"He has at least five hundred men," Avila replied, "and several cannon. It would appear that he has done little to organize any Indian resistance against us. I would guess that it will be, primarily, Spaniard against Spaniard."

"It is fitting," Cortez said, "since it is our fight, not that of the Totonacs."

"Then we will set ourselves against them, General?" Avila asked eagerly.

Cortez sat there staring into the flames of the fire before him, and listening to the sounds of insects chirping in the night, and softly-spoken Spanish from the tents near them.

"We have no choice, Captain," he said reflectively. "We offered friendship to Narvaez, and he rejected it. Now we must fight again to preserve what we have rightfully won in this new world."

Diaz turned soberly to him. "Dare we hope for victory, Hernando, in open conflict with such a superior force?"

"Maybe," Cortez said. "With surprise, and a plan." A wind had come up, and now blew against his face, and made the fire flicker in the night. "There will be a distraction of nature tonight, to cover our advance. That will give us the chance for surprise."

"Tonight?" Avila said incredulously. "Some of our men have already taken to their beds!"

"We will get them up," Cortez said, "to march to another great victory."

Diaz studied Cortez' square, handsome face in the firelight. The longer he was with the man, the less he doubted his genius.

"They have their artillery situated on the edge of town, to use against our possible attack," Cortez went on, "but most of their men are quartered centrally, away from the guns. I suspect that we might use a surprise attack to take their guns away from them, before they can bring troops to defend them."

Avila looked quizzical, but Diaz smiled knowingly. "And then turn the guns on their owners?" he suggested.

Cortez returned the smile. "You take my meaning, Captain," he said. He rose from his camp chair, Diaz followed suit, and now the smile faded

from Cortez' face, and the look that had frightened Marina at Tlaxcala, and later in bed with him, was replacing the benign one. "Rouse the troops, Avila! We march within the hour! Our rivals in town should just be settling in for a good night's sleep!"

"Yes, General!" Avila responded with a grin.

It was less than an hour later that the camp was up and in arms, some grumbling rancorously, others with fear already gripping their insides. But there was going to be little time for thoughts of death or bloody defeat on this occasion. Some of the troops had just finished getting their gear together, when the order came from their captains to move out.

The wind had risen to a low howl by the time they broke camp, and a light rain had started, and most of them swore under their breaths at their general. It was one thing to have to go into battle against well-armed Spanish troops, but to do so under these terrible conditions was asking too much, they thought. It was a disgruntled and hostile force that moved across the wet, marshy terrain to the few lights of the city, and that was the way Cortez wanted them.

There were two sentries at outposts near Cempoalla, but Cortez had sent two experienced men to dispatch them, and just before Cortez reached the outskirts of the city, they met him with the news that the sentries were dead.

Consequently, it was not until Cortez' infantry marched right up to the city gates that they were seen in the blackness and the rain, and by then Cortez already had the advantage he needed.

An alarm was sounded immediately, and men all over Cempoalla were awakened rudely, some not believing that there was really an attack against

them, rubbing sleep from their eyes and wondering if it were all some kind of dream.

The cannons were manned quickly, and began firing just as Cortez' infantry charged the towers where the artillery stood. Most of the shots, therefore, sang over the heads of Cortez' army and fell harmlessly behind them, as his cavalry supported his foot soldiers in an attack on the guns. In moments infantrymen were climbing walls, using lances and crossbows and knives against the men at the guns, and in a quick, bloody brawl, the cannons were silenced.

Cortez, mounted on his white stallion outside the gates, looked about and saw that only a few infantrymen had been hit by cannon and musket fire. Now he raised his sword and called his second wave of infantry and the main force of his cavalry into action, as his soldiers on the towers laboriously turned the cannons toward the central square, where Narvaez and his army were desperately trying to get organized to respond.

Narvaez himself, quartered at the central square, was still desperately pulling on his armor when Cortez' men had already taken the bulwarks, and when a soldier ran up to him to confirm that they were under attack by Cortez' command, he was unbelieving.

"That impudent scoundrel!" he yelled, getting help with his breast-plate. "I'll demolish him and his band of renegades! Are our cannon mounted against them?"

"They have captured our artillery, General," the messenger told him dolefully.

Now Narvaez was really thunderstruck. He just stared at the man for a long moment.

"They are already in the streets of the city, sir," the soldier concluded. "They came fast, and under cover of the storm." Outside in the square, the wind and rain whipped about the buildings.

Narvaez regained his composure, but less arrogantly. "Damn them! Damn him! Out and at them, soldier!"

"Yes, sir!"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, a cannon ball came whistling into the building, knocking the soldier down and throwing Narvaez against a wall as masonry rained around him. He staggered away from it, coughing and sputtering, his eyes wide, and he felt fear for the first time. He drew his sword anxiously, staring at his fallen messenger, who lay at his feet, his head bloody.

"Captains!" Narvaez yelled. "*Mount your defenses! Captains!*"

Then he stumbled out into the street, where absolute chaos reigned as infantrymen tried to get out of the way of whistling cannon balls from their own guns, and cavalry soldiers were gathering to launch some kind of counter-attack against the impetuous soldiery of Cortez.

Out at the edge of town, Cortez urged his troops forward and into the city, not wanting to lose the element of surprise. In the teeth of a driving rain, he rode among them.

"Espiritu Santo! *Upon them, men, for St. Jago and the crown!*"

Now the tough veterans who had prevailed at Tabasco and Tlaxcala and had known the recent fury of battle as few Spaniards had, swarmed down those Cempoalla streets like furies from hell, with almost no firearms, going against guns with lances

and swords. The cannons from the towers announced their onslaught violently, tearing and ripping at men and masonry at the central area, crashing buildings to the ground, raising dust and debris and starting fires that sent black smoke curling into the wet night sky.

When the two forces met, near the central square, Narvaez' troops were not ready for combat. Only half of them were armed and waiting, and some were wounded or shocked by cannon fire. Cortez' men had come swiftly, and now they rushed their countrymen with a wild yell, and Narvaez' stunned troops began falling back under the savage assault. Narvaez was astride a brown stallion, wielding his sword furiously amidst the melee, and he received a wound in the arm, and then one in the thigh. A moment later, Cortez rode into the square with his cavalry, and Narvaez' cavaliers, who had just organized their ranks, met Cortez' men in a pitched battle. Cortez saw Narvaez almost immediately, and rode toward him, hacking and cutting with his sword. But before he could get there, Narvaez was pulled off his mount by a wild-looking Cortez musketeer, and a second soldier jammed a lance at Narvaez' head. It struck him in the eye, but did not kill him. He screamed in awful pain as the first soldier prepared to run him through. But then a Narvaez cavalier swiped at the soldier's head with his saber, and almost tore it from the man's shoulders. Narvaez crawled away then, screaming for help, toward the perimeter of the square.

Cortez saw it all, but could not get to Narvaez. A cavalier rushed Cortez, yelling obscenities, and swung a long sword fiercely at him. Cortez twisted in his saddle, and the sword glanced off his breast-

plate, and then he brought his own sword around in a wide arc and sliced it diagonally into the soldier's face and head. The fellow lost his nose and part of his lower jaw, and then fell in agony and shock to the ground. Alonzo Avila, who had lost his horse and was dismounted, ran up then and plunged his sword into the fellow's chest.

He glanced up at Cortez then, his square face wet with rain, his left arm bloody. "*For St. Jago, General!*"

Before Cortez could reply, though, a musket ball hit Avila under the right ear, and killed him instantly. His eyes widened, as if he had just seen a vision of his true God, and then he went down under Cortez' stallion's hoofs.

Now more of Narvaez' troops were streaming into the square, and adjacent streets; but many of them, because of Cortez' pre-assault propaganda, had no heart for fighting. They no longer believed in their cause. Some could even be heard to yell out for their comrades to join the assailants.

In just a short time, white flags began waving at various places around the center of town, and Cortez' cavaliers had their counterparts in ragged retreat. Cortez turned to a voice behind him, as the confusion lessened, and it was Bernal Diaz. He was unscathed, and held his sword proudly in his strong right hand.

"They are defeated, General! Their will to fight us is gone!"

Cortez nodded. "Good." He spotted Narvaez now, leaning against a building wall nearby, holding a hand to his destroyed eye. A captain beside him also held up a white flag of truce.

In a battle lasting less than an hour, Cortez had

demolished a well-armed European contingent two to three times the size of his own, and forced their surrender. He was again in sole charge of Spanish forces in Mexico. He held his sword aloft, above his head, and shouted hoarsely to his men around him.

"Victory for St. Jago!"

"For St. Jago! For St. Jago!" came the staccato reply from his troops, as their prisoners listened in stunned and awe-stricken silence.

Cortez now sheathed his sword, and rode over to Narvaez, and looked down haughtily upon him. Narvaez glared at him with his good eye, still in terrible pain.

"Damn you, Cortez!" he spat out. "You compound your offenses against the crown and your fellow man! But for your good fortune of the storm, I would have you all in irons now, those of you who survived our righteous wrath! You are a very lucky fellow!"

Cortez grinned a hard grin, and Diaz, behind him, did likewise. "I do not need luck against the likes of you, General," Cortez said pleasantly. The rain had stopped now, and his soldiers had the square under control. He turned to a cavalier near him.

"Arrest this man and those of his officers who led the fight against us," he said stiffly. "They will be returned to San Juan de Ulua in irons."

"You damned scoundrel!" Narvaez said loudly, still holding the hand over his face wound.

Cortez stared hard at Narvaez as he spoke. "Then bring the rest of his army—men and officers—to me, at dawn. Those wishing to join our holy cause may enlist with us and share our destiny in Tenochtitlan. Any who refuse the offer will be put in irons and returned to San Juan de Ulua with this—general."

"My men will not follow you!" Narvaez protested loudly.

But he was wrong. By the end of that next day, most of his force had enlisted under Cortez' banner, swelling his ranks to over five hundred, and giving Cortez the impetus he badly needed to resume his quest for domination of the isthmus.

Now, as soon as he was reorganized, he could return to Tenochtitlan.

He had already been gone too long.

At the Spanish headquarters in the Aztec capital, Marina grieved for her dead friend Isabel, and blamed herself for her death. She would not leave her room. It was now spring again, and the air outside the Palace of Axayacatl was redolent with blossoms, but Marina did not smell them, nor did she notice the sunshine that streamed in through every opening.

Dona Isabel lay buried in a garden at the rear of the palace grounds.

And her general was still gone.

Alvarado was told of the attempt on Marina's life the very night that it happened, but he had not called Marina or the girl Linala in to talk with them about it, even though Jamarillo and Marina were certain that the plot was the creation of the emperor's daughter. Instead, Alvarado became suddenly very secretive, and began talking to the other officers there about a plot to destroy the entire Spanish contingent. He sent spies to the Royal Palace, and brought Aztec nobles in for questioning. He sent Linala to her father's suite in the headquarters, making her a prisoner, too, but without telling her why. Montezuma, not knowing what had happened, wondered about this move, and sent a message to

Alvarado which Alvarado arrogantly refused to reply to.

Finally, Alvarado sent for Marina, Linala, and Jamarillo. They met at Alvarado's—or Cortez'—office, and a fifth person was also present: a subordinate officer called Gomez who had found and questioned the Aztec officer who had relayed Guatemozin's and Linala's orders to the two warriors guilty of Marina's attempted murder and the death of Isabel.

After brief preliminaries, Alvarado got right to business, in his arrogant, offensive way.

"We have proof now," he said to Linala, who sat haughtily on a straight chair with the others around his desk-table. "Gomez here has wrested the truth from one of your nobles, Dona Ana. You and Guatemozin planned the murder of Dona Marina and Dona Isabel."

Linala gave him an acid look. She was not cowed by any of them. Now that her plan to kill Marina had failed, all of Guatemozin's few allies in the noble ranks had deserted him, and there was no possibility of mounting an offensive against the Spanish quarters. But that did not make her any less arrogant in her manner. When Montezuma himself had asked her if she had caused trouble with the Spaniards, she had lied to him boldly, refusing to share her secret with him.

Linala had understood little of what Alvarado said, so Marina translated, and Linala's look became even more acid. "That is a lie!" she said imperiously.

Marina shook her head slowly. "You godless girl," she said to Linala. Then she translated her reply.

Alvarado's face flushed angrily. "The man we

interrogated was the middle-man between you and your killers!" he said loudly. He shouted the man's name at her, and her face changed. "Now do you recall your villainy?"

Linala did not reply, and her look was not so arrogant.

"Captain Jamarillo here got a dying confession from the lips of one of your hirelings, also!" Alvarado went on. "And he implicated both you and your cousin!"

Linala glanced at the tall Jamarillo, who sat near her. He met her gaze somberly. He saw little point in all this. The imprisonment of the girl with her father was sufficient. If open accusations were to be made, they should have been made in the presence of the emperor, Jamarillo thought.

"It is true," he said to her.

Linala stuck her chin out and her young face continued to register defiance. "All right," she said, after Marina had said it in Nahautl. "I am implicated. My cousin and I consider the Malin girl an enemy of the emperor!"

"That is a foul falsehood!" Marina said loudly to her.

"Does she still deny?" Alvarado asked.

Marina turned angrily to him. "She admits guilt," she said darkly. "She accuses me of hostility toward Montezuma."

Jamarillo grunted. "I would think you're the best friend he has here."

"Have you planned any treachery against Montezuma?" Alvarado now asked Marina imperiously.

She cast a grim look at him. "I plan no treachery against any man!" she said with angry deliberation.

Alvarado nodded acknowledgment as if he were King Charles himself upon his throne, and she

wondered how she could so dislike a man who was in the process of discovering her potential murderer.

"Very well," Alvarado said, sitting there in his armor, his beard looking almost white in the sun from a window. "I believe you, Dona Marina, in the absence of evidence against you."

"Of course!" Jamarillo interposed irritably. "A denial of Marina's guilt is hardly necessary, Captain!"

"The only evidence before me," Alvarado went on, like a grand jurist, "is against this Aztec princess."

"The officer who gave the orders confessed it all, just before I slit his ugly throat," the man called Gomez said.

Alvarado gave him a hard look, for the interruption. "It is also clear," he then went on, "that this attack on our women is merely part of a larger scheme to make a general, all-out assault on this headquarters, by the Aztec army!" He leaned forward, scowling toward Linala. "Is this not true, Dona Ana?"

Marina furrowed her brow. "Surely your sources did not make such a confession?"

"Put the question to her, damn it!" Alvarado said harshly.

Marina pressed her lips together, and turned to Linala and repeated what Alvarado had said.

Linala sighed heavily. "There is no plan against you. There are too many cowards among us!"

Marina repeated, and Alvarado still scowled. "Another lie!" he said loudly. "I can see it in her face! I can feel the hostility in the streets against us! An attack on us is imminent! Admit it, damn you, girl, and save your life!"

Marina regarded Alvarado with astonishment.

"No matter what she has done, she is Montezuma's daughter!" she reminded him. "You may not threaten her life, Captain!"

Alvarado rose from his chair. "I may strike her down in this room, with my righteous sword!" he said loudly to Marina, "if I so choose!"

A strained silence fell over the room. Finally, Jamarillo spoke up, grimly. "I don't think, Captain, that Dona Ana has any knowledge of a general conspiracy. It seems improbable that there is one. We know that Guatemozin has few supporters, because to support him is to defy Montezuma, who still reigns over Anahuac, even though he is our prisoner. I don't think Guatemozin can muster a sufficient force against us, to make a successful attack."

Alvarado glared toward Jamarillo for a long moment, then turned away from them all. "You set yourself against me, Captain. Don't ever do it again."

Jamarillo rose. "Captain, I only speak what—"

Alvarado whirled on him. "*Enough!*" he shouted.

Jamarillo stood there, stunned by Alvarado's aggressive behavior. Marina glanced toward him, worried. With Cortez gone, he was now her only friend.

"I will conduct a further investigation of this matter," Alvarado now continued, "and you will all be advised of its outcome, as the purpose serves me. You're dismissed."

"What about the Aztec girl?" the officer named Gomez asked Alvarado, as Jamarillo turned to Marina, and she rose to leave.

"She is no further danger to us," Alvarado grumbled. "Confine her to the emperor's quarters, and see that she receives no visitors."

"Yes, Captain," Gomez said.

They filed out, and when they were all gone, Alvarado paced the floor for a few minutes, pensive. Then he left his quarters and went downstairs to the officers' dining room, where he found Gomez. He had turned Linala over to guards, and was now starting a late lunch. Alvarado came over to where he sat alone at a long trestle table, and sat down beside him. Except for a couple of cooks behind a table, they were alone.

"Will you join me, Captain?" Gomez asked.

Alvarado shook his head. "I'm not hungry. I have important things on my mind this day. The safety of the garrison is, after all, my responsibility."

"You are concerned about the Aztecs?"

Alvarado stared past Gomez, unheeding. Like the cavalier Ordaz, Alvarado was a born killer, although he did not think of himself as such. It was not ambition that drove him to frenzy, as with Cortez, but a lust for blood and violence. It was he who had aroused Cortez to such a fever pitch against the Cholulans, and had suggested the massacre of their warlords at their armory. Now, with no provocation whatever, a similar idea was creeping into his head—an idea that, when put into action, would ignite the smoldering coals of unrest among the Aztecs that had long been set under them with Montezuma's arrest, and change the entire course of the Spanish enterprise in Anahuac.

"Yes," Alvarado finally replied. "I am deeply concerned. I am certain that there will be an attempt to annihilate our force here, before the general returns to us. And I intend to do something about it."

Gomez took a bite of a torta filled with pork, and chewed it. "What can you do, Captain?"

Alvarado turned to him. "Montezuma told us a couple of days ago that there will be a celebration soon, at the Royal Palace, called the Incensing of Huitzilopotchli. I made no objection to it, and now it pleases me very much that I did not."

"The Incensing of—"

"It is a religious festival, to be attended in a closed garden by most of the nobles of Tenochtitlan," Alvarado explained, now thinking aloud. "They will wear their finest jewelry of gold and silver, and precious stones." His voice trailed off. But he had caught the interest of Gomez, who stopped eating at the mention of gold.

"Many of those present at the gathering," Alvarado went on, "will be leaders who hate us Spaniards with a fervent hatred, and who either plan our annihilation, or will rejoice in it."

"And they will come to this celebration unarmed, under your orders, of course?" Gomez grinned.

Alvarado nodded, and when he replied, it was with a quiet hunger that would have been unnerving to a listener more sensitive than Gomez.

"Yes," he said darkly. "Unarmed."

Gomez read his captain's face, and grinned more broadly. "What an interesting situation it makes," he said.

Alvarado nodded grimly. "And what an opportunity."

In the next few days, Alvarado engaged in his secret machinations. He selected only a few officers for his plan, ones whom he knew would go along with it without objection. Jamarillo was excluded, as were others who would resist such an idea in the absence of the general. The purpose of the plan was not shared with the Spanish troops who would be

used—they would be told at the last moment what they were about, at the Royal Palace.

On the day of the celebration, just past midday, word came from Cempoalla that Cortez had been victorious against Narvaez there. Jamarillo and Marina were overjoyed at the news, and the Spanish troops cheered in the courtyard and gardens of the headquarters, knowing that they would soon be reinforced with fresh troops, guns and ammunition.

For Alvarado, Cortez' victory only made him all the more anxious to proceed with his plan against the Aztec nobles, so that he would have a chance to display his own cleverness before Cortez returned to retrieve leadership from him.

Consequently, on that gala night for the Aztec nation, Alvarado lined the streets between Spanish quarters and the Royal Palace with armed Indian troops, mid-way through the evening and without notice to Montezuma, and then marched most of his Spanish troops to the celebration. The palace guard was light, since the removal of Montezuma to Spanish headquarters, and no attempt was made to halt Alvarado's march into the palace, or on into the garden to the rear, where the festival was just beginning.

It was a beautiful sight that met the Spaniards. The garden, enclosed by walls, was lighted by braziers and decorated with the figures of gods. On a wide patio stood the several hundred nobles—mostly young ones, and mainly men—talking and drinking native wine. At the side of the garden were trestle tables for a banquet, but the meal and the serious religious ritual would come later. Now there was only quiet discussion and an occasional sound of laughter.

The men were dressed in gala costumes, wearing

mantles and feathered headdresses in the Aztec custom, and jewelry of gold and stones and rare shells. The few women present wore filmy gauze dresses with brilliant designs worked into them, and bands on their sleek hair, and their skin was scented. On this night they were going to try to forget the Spaniards in their midst, and the imprisonment of their great emperor, and celebrate the survival of one of their most important gods.

When the Spaniards arrived on the patio, there was no panic, although the talking slowly stopped as Alvarado ordered his men to split in two lines and enclose the perimeter of the patio. They obeyed, and the dull clanking of their armor was now the only sound in the garden. In just moments, they were in place.

Alvarado looked around for Guatemozin, but did not see him. He had not arrived. But there could be no delay.

A heavy silence had now fallen over the gaudily-clad assemblage. A middle-aged noble came forward toward Alvarado, his brow furrowed. He was a general in the Aztec army.

"Captain Alvarado! What is the meaning of this? Why do you interrupt our holy festivity?"

Alvarado did not know enough Nahuatl to understand exactly, but he got the meaning. He looked around without replying, seeing that there were no visible weapons among them. That was the way he wanted it. He turned to his men, who still did not know the exact nature of their mission.

"They plan our death!" he said loudly. "Behind our backs, in their temples of evil, and their decadent palaces! Now let that death descend on them instead, men of Castile!"

There was a murmur of anger among the Spanish troops, and then Alvarado drew his sword. Now there were dark mutterings from the Aztecs, and a woman across the patio cried out in terror.

"Ready your weapons to kill!" Alvarado said to his men.

All around the edge of the patio, swords were drawn grimly now, and lances lowered to waist level. A few obscenities were shouted from the ranks, as Alvarado raised his sword overhead, his face now dark with emotion.

"There will be no prisoners!" he yelled. *"No prisoners! St. Jago and at them!"*

In the next instant, Alvarado lunged forward and plunged his weapon into the chest of the noble who had addressed him.

The fellow fell backward in shock, and Alvarado's sword came out of him, crimson-smeared, and there were more shouts of fear through the Aztecs. But, as the Aztec general fell, the Spaniards fell on the assemblage wildly, and the slaughter began.

A few Spaniards hung back, another massacre repugnant to them, but most felt that their very lives were at stake in this proceeding. In just moments they were hacking their way through the brightly-cloaked nobility. A few Aztecs had knives on their persons, and tried to fight back, but it was useless against the superior weaponry and armor of their enemies. One Spanish infantryman was cut across the face, and a second was stabbed shallowly in the side. But there were no other injuries as they made their bloody way to the center of the patio, murdering wantonly. The few women present, screaming terribly, were not spared. One went down with a ragged hole just between her breasts, and

another had been half-scalped by a saber. The Aztec men fought back valiantly with their bare hands, lunging at the Spaniards and knocking some of them down, but then would end with a lance through the back or side. A handful of palace guards came with javelins, and were also butchered mercilessly.

In fifteen minutes, it was over. The patio blocks underfoot were slippery with blood, and corpses were everywhere. Bright garments were crimson-smeared, feathered headdresses lay crumpled and broken beside still, mangled forms. A few still had life, so the Spanish soldiers went among them methodically plunging daggers into their necks, as if it were the finish of a *corrida de toros*. All gold and silver jewelry was ripped or cut off the corpses, and one dead woman was molested physically.

One Spanish soldier stood off at the garden wall, and stared hard at the scene before him, and was sick on the ground, despite his experience with such atrocities at Cholula.

Alvarado stood in the center of it all, his chest still heaving, his cheeks flushed with physical excitement, as if he had just finished with a woman.

Less than a half-hour later, they marched back to their own headquarters, carrying their loot. By the time they got half-way, the people on the street knew what had happened at the palace, and a great uproar began. Thousands of Aztecs were in the streets by the time Alvarado led his men back into the relative safety of the Spanish headquarters, and there was a frenzied attack against the Totonac and Tlaxcalan Indians lining the route, in which many were killed. A few Aztecs broke through their ranks, and threw themselves at the heavily-armed Spaniards, and one Spanish soldier was wounded. But then they were

back inside their own walls, taking as many Indian allies in with them as they had room for.

Listening to the clamor outside the gates, Alvarado and his men realized the outrage and anguish of the Aztecs in the street, on that black night.

It was the darkest moment in Aztec history.

Chapter Ten

The rioting and sporadic attacks on Spanish headquarters continued through that night and the following day. But it was not organized, and Alvarado handled it without difficulty. He finally fired several cannon shots into the howling, anguished locals, scattering them in all directions, and by sunset on the next day, the city had grown quiet again.

Numbness had set in.

Grief and mourning predominated.

A sizeable segment of Aztec leadership had been wiped out at a single blow by the unreasoning savagery of the Spaniards.

First they had lost their emperor, and now the Aztec nobility had been decimated by these monsters from another world.

It was clear now that appeasement would not rid them of this menace. Now it was time to rise up in righteous indignation, and strike the enemy down. But first there would be weeping for the dead, and praying to the gods, and reorganizing.

Later would come revenge.

Soon Huitzilopotchli would have his day.

Inside the Spanish headquarters, those few who had remained there during the massacre were

shocked to learn what had happened. Jamarillo went to Alvarado that very night to register his outrage, but Alvarado refused to see him.

Marina learned about it later that night, while still with Montezuma in his quarters. She was teaching him Spanish at his request, when the messenger came to them, an Aztec noble with fear and anger in his face. When he announced his news, both Montezuma and Marina sat there stunned and silent for a long moment. Then tears appeared in Montezuma's eyes, and rolled down onto his cheek.

"I counseled them not to listen to Guatemozin," he said quietly. "I told them that they should not cause trouble with the Spaniards, but try to get along peaceably. They listened to me, and now they are gone. All gone."

"Oh, Jesus and Mary!" Marina murmured, standing at his side. "Oh, God in heaven! We have a madman in charge while our general is away!"

"Now I have lost all authority over them," Montezuma went on. "They won't listen to me any longer. This is an outrage beyond their understanding."

Marina was trembling inside. "I will see this monster!" she said fiercely. "I will warn him that his general will soon be here, and there must be an accounting!"

"Yes," Montezuma mumbled. "An accounting."

Marina tried to see Alvarado that night, too, but he would not see her or Jamarillo then or through the next day. He conferred secretly with a few of his hard-bitten subordinates about defenses around headquarters, and ordered the cannons fired in the afternoon against the outraged Aztecs, and stayed to himself.

It was early that evening when Marina went to him again, and the guard outside his door admitted her. Alvarado was dressed in his uniform pants and tunic, his beard was trimmed, and he looked smug when he turned to her.

"Well. The Malin princess. I'm told you don't agree with my tactics against our enemies. I'm surprised. After all, their plotting against us almost got you killed! There's no saying they wouldn't try again, either. I've probably saved your Indian skin."

Marina came to the center of the brazier-lighted room. "Damn you, Captain! You've destroyed everything we've worked for here! You're a soulless murderer!"

He grinned harshly. "In this enterprise, one must murder to survive."

"You *like* it!" she hurled at him. "You *like* killing! You are the most evil man I've ever met! And I intend to report all this just the way it happened, to the general, when he arrives!"

The smile slid from his square face. He walked past her and closed the door behind her, and slid the wooden bolt closed. When he turned back to her, his face was grim.

"You have given me trouble from the beginning," he said quietly, "working your woman's ways on Cortez. Influencing him in his bed. Refusing others your body with your foolish arrogance. You are only an Indian, Malinche, and a Spaniard takes an Indian woman if and when he wants her. If you don't know that yet, it's time I taught you."

Alvarado came close to her, his eyes glinting darkly. She stumbled a step away from him.

"No," she said under her breath.

"Oh, yes. You refused me before, but now I am the

commander. What I want, I take. And maybe when I'm through with you, you won't be so eager to make trouble for me with Cortez. Maybe you just might gain some respect for me."

"If you molest me, the general will know," she said, her breath now coming short, her pulse pounding in her ears.

"I'll explain it all to him," he grinned harshly. "I'll say you came to me."

"He won't believe you!" she said loudly.

"We'll see," he grinned. He reached forward and grabbed her cotton dress, and as she pulled away it ripped off her shoulder.

One of her breasts was suddenly exposed. She gasped and turned from him, running to the far wall. When she turned back, though, he was there.

"No!" she cried out.

He grabbed at her naked breast, and mauled it roughly as he pulled her to him. She raked her nails across his cheek, fighting him off, and left scratches there that bled. Alvarado only laughed, and forced her to the floor.

In those next few moments, they wrestled wildly, and when Alvarado saw her strength, he decided to shorten the struggle. He hit her across the face once, and stunned her, and then hit her again. Darkness crept in on her field of vision, and then she felt rough hands pulling her skirt up past her thighs to her hips.

Alvarado fumbled with his clothing for a moment then, and mounted her. Her dress was half-torn off her body, and, with a grunting sound like that of a wild boar, he forced himself into a hard, brutal union with her. She cried out in pain, still semi-conscious, and then she felt him moving in her, tearing and bruising, ravaging her insides.

In just moments it was finished, and she heard his ragged gasping in her ear, and his fists were clenched tightly beside her head. She was fully conscious when he separated himself from her, and she gasped in pain. Her left eye was swelling shut, and her right cheek was turning blue. In her groin there was a dull aching, as if she had been beaten.

She opened her eyes, to see Alvarado standing over her. He was about to speak to her, when there was a commotion in the corridor, the door banged open, and Jamarillo burst in.

He took one look at Marina on the floor where Alvarado had left her, and his eyes widened, and a growl began deep in his throat.

"Damn you!" he hissed at Alvarado. "*Damn you!*" He drew the sword at his side, and brandished it. "You butcher, now you die!"

Alvarado eyed the shining sword. Behind Jamarillo, two stunned guards watched at the doorway. "Don't be foolish, Jamarillo," Alvarado said arrogantly. "I am the commander of this garrison, and I am unarmed."

Jamarillo closed in on him. "This is not a duel, you black-hearted bastard! This is the killing of a lower form of life!"

Jamarillo swung the sword down toward Alvarado's head viciously. But in his anger the blow went wild, and Alvarado side-stepped it. It narrowly missed beheading him, and clanged into the wall beside him. Marina, lying near them on the floor, gasped in new fear.

Jamarillo stepped back, and raised the sword again. "I'll cut your black heart out for this!" he grated.

But the two guards had lunged across the room

now, and caught Jamarillo on either side. He struggled to free himself, but they had him in a firm grasp, and hung on desperately.

Finally Jamarillo quit struggling, and Alvarado came off the wall, the momentary fear gone now from his face. Marina sat up, pulling her torn dress down over her thighs, and got awkwardly to her feet, leaning on the wall.

"Are you all right?" Jamarillo asked her, knowing that she was not.

She nodded. "It's all right—Juan."

Alvarado now yanked the sword from Jamarillo's right hand, and held the point near Jamarillo's face. The fear of a moment before had been replaced by a deadly anger.

"When you try to kill a man, you had better succeed!" he growled darkly. Then he drew the sword back to plunge it into Jamarillo's chest.

"*God, no!*" Marina cried out.

Before Alvarado could drive the weapon home, though, a messenger came bursting into the room behind Jamarillo, his face flushed with excitement. He took in what was happening, and his face changed, but then he made his announcement.

"Captain!"

Alvarado lowered the point of the sword slightly, nettled by the interruption. "What is it?"

"The general is back! He has five hundred men with him, and is encamped in the foothills for the night! He will be here early tomorrow morning!"

Marina's eyes filled, and her lip trembled. "Thank God!" she muttered through bruised lips. "Oh, thank God!"

Alvarado glanced at her, and then at Jamarillo, and finally dropped the sword to his side. "Well.

That's good news." He turned away from all of them for a moment, getting his control back. When he met Jamarillo's gaze again, his face was impassive.

"You're a lucky man, Jamarillo. I'll let Cortez decide your punishment." He spoke then to the guards. "Take them both away. Confine the girl to her quarters, and put the captain in irons. I'll tend further to him in the morning."

"Yes, Captain!"

Jamarillo glared at Alvarado, but did not resist his guards as they took him and Marina away.

There was no need now.

Cortez had returned.

At the far side of the causeway the following morning, just after dawn, Cortez stood at the head of his Spanish columns and stared toward Tenochtitlan. He had had no communication from the city yet, and knew nothing of what had happened in his absence.

But he knew something was wrong. All the way down through the valley, the Aztecs had held themselves aloof from the marching columns, and even hostile. There had been little friendliness when he left, because of Montezuma's arrest, but there had not been this kind of feeling. Diaz rode up beside him, and also stared. Behind them, many of their troops were seeing Tenochtitlan for the first time, and were silent with wonder.

"You would think they'd be out to watch us return," Diaz remarked. His mount whickered nervously. "If only out of curiosity."

"I don't like it," Cortez said. "I hope they haven't attacked our headquarters."

"Look!" Diaz said. "A rider on the causeway. It's one of our men!"

The Spanish rider came across the long causeway at a gallop, looming larger with every moment. When he arrived, he was flushed and breathless.

"General!" he said, trying to get his breath. "How good to see you back here, sir!"

Cortez nodded. He was bareheaded, holding his helmet at his side, reining his mount in tightly.

The officer came closer to him. "Captain Jamarillo sent me out here, General. He is in chains."

"What?" Diaz said in surprise.

"There was a disagreement," the fellow went on. "Between him and Alvarado. About the attack on the Aztec lords. And about the girl, Dona Marina."

Cortez scowled. "Attack on the lords? What about Dona Marina? Speak up, damn it!"

"Alvarado went to the Aztec festival. A couple of nights ago. I did not participate, General. I guarded the headquarters, with others."

Diaz frowned harshly. "What happened, you fool?"

"He killed the Aztec nobles at the festival," the fellow answered. "He killed them all!"

Cortez stared somberly at the messenger, and then he and Diaz exchanged looks.

"Was this to abort a planned attack on the headquarters?" Cortez asked quietly.

The fellow shrugged, a light breeze blowing his hair. "Alvarado says so, but Jamarillo says there was no plot against us. So also says the Lady Marina. Now the Aztecs keep inside, and distribute weapons, and organize against us. It is not like before. There is going to be trouble, General."

Sandoval rode up beside Cortez and Diaz. "Is everything all right, General? The men are eager to march into the capital."

Cortez held up his hand to Sandoval, still holding the messenger's gaze. "And what about Dona Marina? Why did you mention her?"

The fellow's voice lowered. "She is confined to her room, General. There was a—physical assault. By Alvarado."

Cortez' scowl deepened. "All right, Sandoval. Give the order to march."

Sandoval's face, too, was somber now. "Yes, General."

This entry into Tenochtitlan was far different from Cortez' initial arrival. After they had crossed the southern causeway, they found the streets almost deserted. A few youths and children were out, and they hurled obscenities at the marching columns, and a few missiles of stone or masonry. Cortez heard the Nahuatl word for "murderer" shouted at him several times. Dark faces peered from behind curtained windows, and the mood was ugly.

Hatred hung in the sunny air.

There was more stone-throwing just outside their headquarters, and massed Aztec warriors on side streets watched grimly as Cortez' front ranks arrived at the Palace of Axayacatl. Outside the main gate, where hundreds of frightened Tlaxcalan warriors huddled under ragged canopies of cloth or matting, two subordinate captains came out to greet Cortez, and Alvarado met him just inside the gate. He and a small retinue were mounted, in honor of Cortez' arrival, and his blonde hair shone in the Aztec sun.

"Greetings to Cortez!" Alvarado said loudly, to the assembled soldiery and Indians in the large courtyard. "*The victor of Cempoalla!*"

Cortez nodded to him, but did not smile. The grin faded from Alvarado's face. Cortez turned to Diaz

and a couple of other officers. "All right, bring them all in. Get the infantry in here before someone gets hurt."

"Yes, General," Diaz acknowledged.

There was some cheering among the gathered defenders of the headquarters, but it died down as Cortez rode up close to Alvarado.

"I want to see you in my quarters, Captain. Immediately," he said.

Alvarado studied his somber face, and knew that Cortez had heard of the Aztec massacre, and about Marina. "We had some trouble while you were gone, Hernando, but I took care of it."

Cortez eyed him acidly. "Inside, Captain Alvarado. As soon as you can get there!"

Alvarado hesitated, then nodded, and then Cortez rode on past him.

Inside in his quarters office a short time later, sitting behind the table that Alvarado had just vacated, Cortez received Alvarado. But he had already spoken to several soldiers and officers about the Royal Palace massacre, including Jamarillo, whom he had had released, and he knew the truth about Alvarado's slaughter of the Aztecs. When Alvarado arrived, Jamarillo and Diaz were already there, as were Aguilar and Ordaz, both of whom had been with Cortez at Cempoalla. Marina had been sent for, but had not yet arrived.

When Alvarado walked in, Cortez was surrounded by the other officers, including the freed Jamarillo. As soon as Alvarado saw Jamarillo, his face changed.

"I thought this was to be a private briefing, General," he said to Cortez moodily.

"All present have been your friends," Cortez

replied to him. There was tension in his square, handsome face.

"This man," Alvarado said loudly, "attacked my person, and my authority here in your absence! I was against his promotion at Tlaxcala, and I demand his punishment now, my general!"

Cortez held his gaze somberly. "Tell me about the festival of Huitzilopotchli, Captain," he said, ignoring Alvarado's outburst.

Alvarado paused, glanced narrowly toward Jamarillo, and began. He told about the attempt on Marina's life, his fears of an attack, and his resultant action. He told it in a way that made it sound most reasonable. But when he finished, Cortez was still scowling.

Alvarado had once been a friend, but Cortez felt no friendship toward now this man.

"When I left you in charge here, Captain, everything was under control. The Aztecs were still listening to Montezuma, and he was doing as we bid him. Now he has requested a conference with me. He says he has lost all influence over his people, since your attack at the Royal Palace."

Alvarado took offense. "Because of my timely action, General, many warlords have been cut down before they can organize against us!"

Cortez' face reddened. "Guatemozin was not cut down, nor were most of the Aztec nobles who side with him against us!" he reminded Alvarado. "And you may be sure that even as we talk here, promotions are being made and reorganizations effected to fill the ranks you decimated!"

A heavy silence filled the room.

"You have done badly," Cortez finally continued. "You have been false to the trust I placed in you."

Your conduct has been reprehensible. It is my understanding that you have even molested Dona Marina." His tone had lowered to a growl.

Alvarado glanced at Jamarillo, who had maintained his silence. "She came to my quarters, flaunting herself. She wanted diversion in your absence, and I accommodated her."

Now Jamarillo shouted at him, "*That is a foul lie, damn you!*"

At that moment the door opened, and a guard entered with Marina.

She stood there somberly, a big blue-green bruise around her left eye, and a yellow one on her right cheek. Her eyes filled with tears when she saw Cortez.

"Greetings, my general," she said quietly.

"By holy Jesus!" Aguilar said darkly. After Jamarillo, he was the one who had taken the most interest in Marina's welfare.

Alvarado turned to glance at her, and then dropped his gaze to the floor.

Bernal Diaz swore under his breath.

Cortez' was torn with frustration and anger. He moved past Alvarado without glancing at him and went to Marina and gently touched her bruised cheek. "My sweet Marina," he said quietly.

Then, without taking his eyes off her, he spoke to Diaz. "Captain Diaz, take this damnable underling to the courtyard and execute him publicly!"

Alvarado whirled on Cortez, his eyes narrowed to slits. "What?"

Cortez now spun toward him, and drew his sword from its scabbard. "*Get out of my sight, or I will kill you myself!*"

Alvarado held his gaze for a long moment, then

moved past Cortez and Marina heavily, stunned. Diaz nodded to Ordaz and the guard, and they accompanied Alvarado to the door.

"Hold him for a moment in the corridor," Diaz said to them.

They nodded, and the door closed behind them. Diaz came over to Cortez, who was just returning his sword to its scabbard.

"Hernando," Diaz said. "You cannot execute him."

Jamarillo stepped forward, dark-visaged. "Why not? Did any villain ever deserve it more?"

Cortez glanced at Diaz, and then at Jamarillo. Marina came over to him, and embraced him, not thinking about any of it. She only wanted to be held by him, and caressed by him.

"It's all right now, dear Marina," Cortez said to her, ignoring Diaz for the moment.

Diaz turned to Jamarillo. "I am as offended by his behavior as anyone in this room. But he led almost a hundred men to the Royal Palace on that black night, men whom we badly need with us now. His execution will be a divisive action at a time when we need unity and loyalty."

Jamarillo and Cortez stared at him darkly, and Jamarillo finally turned away, frustrated by Diaz' reasoning. Aguilar came forward then, and spoke to Cortez. "What Diaz says is true, General."

Diaz went on. "He has already been arrested and humiliated," he said. "Keep him under guard, and relieve him of command. A time may come, and soon, when we will need him. He is a skilled cavalry officer."

Cortez sighed heavily, and glanced again at Marina's bruises. "Well?" he said to her. "Shall I spare your attacker?"

Marina so hated Alvarado that she was all knotted up inside. She had to acknowledge to herself that his death would have pleased her very much, so much that she wondered about her standing as a Christian. "I—will defer to Captain Diaz' judgment," she said bitterly.

Jamarillo turned and stared at her. He wished that she were embracing him, that she loved him, instead of the general. "Are you sure, Dona Marina?" he asked her.

She nodded, without replying.

"All right," Cortez said. "Place Alvarado under guard in his quarters. And don't let me see his face again, until further notice."

"It will be done," Diaz said.

"And now, please excuse us," Cortez asked them. "I wish to be alone with Dona Marina."

"Yes, General," Diaz replied.

A moment later, Cortez and Marina were alone in the room. He unbuckled his armor, and she assisted him, in silence. When they were finished, he met her gaze.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She smiled warmly, happy to have him back. "It's all right. You've come back to me."

"I'm partly to blame. He would never have taken the liberty, if I had not given him the notion that it would be perhaps permissible."

"Let us not look for additional villains," she told him. "One is enough."

He took her hand. "Come, my Marina."

He led her into his sleeping room then, where soft sunlight streamed across the tiled floor. In one corner was his broad pallet-bed, and he led her there.

"Now we will wash all this from our minds," he told her. "We will find contentment in each other."

He took her to him, and touched her breast. She flinched slightly.

"You are hurt there?" he asked.

She shook her head. "The wound is inside me, my general. I will be all right."

He kissed her gently then, and she felt the warmth of him against her, and his strong hands, the tension began relaxing inside her.

"I am still your woman, Hernando?" she asked him softly. "Despite what Alvarado did to me?"

Cortez laughed quietly. "Of course, dear Marina. Alvarado makes no difference. Except to make me realize, more clearly, how much affection I have for you."

"Truly, Hernando?"

"Truly."

She unfastened her belt, and then pulled the dress off gingerly, and stood before him in all her beauty, and somehow she seemed more desirable to him than ever before.

"Be—tender with me, this time," she said.

Cortez took her soft curves to him, and felt her all along the length of him, and she sent fire licking through his groin, as always.

"I will," he whispered to her.

Then they were on the pallet-bed, and he was unclothed, and their bodies gently intertwined there, caressing, touching, probing all the secret places. At union there was pain for her, but then there was only the rhythmic pulsing, and the sweet fire in her, and the beautiful moment when he erupted like an Aztec fire-mountain, spewing forth deep into her his hot torrent of love.

When he separated cautiously from her, not long afterward, Marina realized that it had been like the

very first time with him, before Tlaxcala and Cholula and all the ugliness. Lying beside him in the morning sun, she guessed that now was the moment to tell him. Now was the time to share her good news, to balance all the bad.—

She turned to him. "Hernando, there is something very pleasant that I saved to tell you, until this quiet moment."

Cortez turned to her quizzically. "Yes? I would appreciate something pleasant."

"I knew it even before you left, but I did not want to tell you then," she told him.

His brow furrowed. "What is it, dear Marina?"

She took a deep breath. "I am pregnant, my general," she said quietly. "I am going to have your child."

Chapter Eleven

With a full-fledged Aztec revolt against his occupation imminent, Cortez' interest in Marina's pregnancy was almost non-existent. He expressed his pleasure to her, on that day when she told him in the privacy of his bedroom, but then he proceeded to act as if it meant nothing to him.

Which was close to the truth.

Cortez expected to assume no responsibility for the offspring of their love-making. Many of his captains and soldiers had left pregnant Indian women behind them on their march to Tenochtitlan, but Cortez paid no attention whatever to the situation. Those children, when born, would be taken care of somehow by their Indian mothers, he reasoned. His *conquistadores* had much more important matters to concern themselves about. Their duty was to the expedition, and to the conversion of the heathen. Not to fatherhood.

So Cortez accepted Marina's pregnancy as something that might cause him a small inconvenience if her services to him—political and otherwise—were interrupted by the birth, but otherwise a thing of little importance to him. At any rate, he could never admit his fatherhood of an Indian child officially, or his priests would make

trouble for him—perhaps even deny his authority to act for the Church.

Fortunately for Marina, there was much more to think about at that moment than her pregnancy, matters that even she had to admit were much more important, so she saw Cortez' indifference as preoccupation with serious military leadership matters, and was spared the embarrassment of knowing his lack of interest. On the third day after Cortez' return, he took a company of infantry into the street to test the mood of the locals, and what he found was rising hostility. A squad of independent Aztec warriors, without leadership from Guatemozin or other high-ranking officers, attacked Cortez' little band of soldiers as it returned to Spanish headquarters, and their assault was so furious that three Spaniards were killed and several wounded before the group could fight its way back into its headquarters.

Cortez was furious, but also dismayed. He had hoped that the locals had cooled off since the Royal Palace massacre, but just the opposite had happened. Slowly and surely, the populace was working itself up into a frenzy against the Spaniards. Rousing speeches were being made on street corners, weapons were being distributed, and Guatemozin now had control of the royal council. The word was that the Aztecs intended to repay Alvarado's atrocity.

The Spaniards were all to die.

The lustre was gone from Cortez' armor, and the halo from his head.

The very day that the Spaniards were attacked on the streets, a build-up of Aztec army units occurred outside the Spanish headquarters on all sides, and it

was learned that Guatemozin was behind the gathering of the siege force, with the council's approval. Lord Tendile, it was rumored, had lost heart for a real battle and had fled Tenochtitlan to a district capital in the mountains. But most warrior-lords who had survived the massacre at the palace, and a majority of the politicians and priests, were behind Guatemozin and Montezuma's brother Cuiclahua in their resolve to rebel against the Spaniards and wipe them out to a man, offering their hearts to Huitzilopotchli, their angered god of war.

Several days after the street attack, Cortez was obliged to bring the rest of his Indians into the massive courtyard of the Spanish headquarters, because they were in danger outside. That left the gate and walls open to attack from the street, and thousands of Aztec warriors and citizens now gathered outside the walls, clamoring more and more loudly for the deaths of the Spaniards.

It was the first part of June when they finally got organized, and the first attack on headquarters took place. It happened on a sunny, warm morning, when Cortez was in conference with his top officers about their hazardous future in the capital. The thousands of Aztecs outside began whooping and shouting, and then they started battering at the large wooden gate with a battering ram, trying to break the barrier down. Others erected ladders and attempted to swarm in on the courtyard.

When it first began, Cortez used mainly Indian defenders, but they were no match for the ferocious Aztecs, and he had to put his best infantry atop the walls and at the gate to stop the attack. The cannons in the turrets roared, and the Aztecs outside were mauled by the hundreds. Spanish guns were aimed

down on them as they scaled the walls, and blowing them to bits. A few reached the courtyard, where they were immediately cut to pieces by Tlaxcalan and Totonac Indians, their traditional enemies.

In a few short hours that first, ill-organized attempt was over. The gate had withstood the assault, and only a handful of Aztecs had managed to penetrate the Spanish defenses. Close to a thousand lay dead in the streets around the palace.

But Cortez knew that their organization was still minimal. And the Spaniards were surrounded by hundreds of thousands of aroused enemies.

Marina, during this assault, had stayed in her room, attended by two Indian servants, and fought the fear inside her that she might be captured by the Aztecs. Even though Montezuma still considered her a friend, most Aztecs, including Guatemozin, placed a high priority on the capture of the Malin princess, and the offering of her beating heart to their gods. Marina had never worried much about all that until she knew for certain that she was pregnant. But now that she was carrying Cortez' child, she was tortured by the fantasy of being captured alive, and having the infant cut from her belly and sacrificed by Aztec priests.

Cortez was not paying much attention to Marina, but she could not fault him. It had begun to occur to him, and to most of his captains, that they might not be strong enough, even with their enlarged force, to maintain their foothold in the Aztec capital. It was just possible that they might be forced to withdraw to a safer place until they could increase the strength of the Spanish forces.

But Cortez was not a man to give in easily to such negative thoughts. He still had Montezuma, and

some of the locals still pledged fealty to him. So Cortez sent for Marina after that first attack on headquarters, and asked her to speak privately with the emperor, and attempt to enlist his help in quieting the city and calling off the siege.

Marina, ever willing to do her part in the Spanish cause despite what had happened to it at Cholula and under Alvarado in the capital, went to Montezuma in his royal suite, near the Spanish officers' quarters, and had a private talk with him.

When she stood before his throne on that mid-afternoon in June, the only persons present besides the emperor and she were two Aztec servants, and two Spanish guards at the door, who were out of earshot. Marina, always remembering protocol, bowed to Montezuma three times in the traditional manner before beginning their conversation. Montezuma sat on his throne heavily, looking very different from the man who had greeted Cortez on the causeway. He had lost weight, there were dark rings under his large eyes, and he looked physically ill. He wore no jewelry, and his flowing robe appeared wrinkled and in disarray to Marina. Something choked up in her throat as she greeted him, and they began their talk.

"Come, Malinche, sit by my side," Montezuma said to her.

Marina hesitated, then seated herself near him on a low stool. "I bring greetings also from the general," she said, "who hopes you are well, your majesty."

"And I wish the general well, also," Montezuma said, with a faint smile. "Word comes to me that you bear his child, and I want to say how pleased I am for you." He coughed weakly, turning from her.

Marina looked up into his dark eyes. "Oh, dear!

What have we done to you?"

"Now, now," Montezuma said quietly. "Things are not as bad for me as they might be. The Spaniards might have executed Linala, but have only confined her to my quarters here. I apologize for her unforgiveable behavior, and for Guatemozin's part in it."

"And I offer my condolences for those nobles who gave their lives at the Royal Palace," Marina said softly. "Such an atrocity is incredible. Cortez wanted to execute Alvarado, but was dissuaded."

"I hear that the Sun brutalized you, too, poor Malinche!"

"He is a monster!" she muttered.

Montezuma touched her shoulder gently. "The Spaniards are in danger, and so are you, because you are at their side. My nephew rouses the populace against them, and he organizes our army. This siege will not end until much blood is shed."

"I believe that, your excellency," she said.

"It would be best, I think, if Cortez took himself from our capital now, and returned to his own homeland, bearing our goodwill to his god-king, and left us to try to forget the blood between us."

"I know," she said quietly.

"As an inducement," Montezuma continued, "I offer Cortez the bulk of the Aztec treasury, which I believe he desires. I have it in my power to make this gift, because it is here in the Palace of Axayacatl."

Marina stared at him in surprise. "Here?"

He nodded. "In a walled-off room, a secret room. Gold in abundance, and silver, and perhaps many things Cortez will not want. But what he does want, I can give him."

Marina reflected on that a moment. The Span-

iards had almost given up all hope of getting a large gift of gold since the siege. At this point, some would be happy to leave with their lives.

"I shall convey this generous offer to the general," she said to him. "And I'm sure that this great gift will be an inducement for his eventual departure." She hesitated. "But the general does not yet talk of leaving Tenochtitlan. He still hopes for a lessening of tensions, great Montezuma. He asks your help in quieting the people."

"My help? They are behind my nephew now. I exert no influence over them."

"Cortez thinks there are those who will still listen to you," she said. "He asks that you address your people at the wall beside the main gate, and ask them to lay down their arms. He wants them to know that he had nothing to do with the killing at the Royal Palace, and that he wishes to be their friend. You are to suggest, additionally, that the Spaniards may even leave the city of their own volition one day soon, if they are not impeded, and if there is no hostility against them."

Montezuma reflected on that for a long time. There was complete silence in the room. At last, he shrugged weakly.

"Very well. I'll make one last plea for the white Malinche. It may be my last public act as emperor."

"Don't suggest such a thing, your highness!" Marina said.

He smiled faintly again. "Tell Cortez I shall accommodate his purpose."

It was the following day that Montezuma addressed the angry mob of soldiers and citizens outside the Spanish headquarters. Steps were set up to the wall beside the main gate, and Cortez and his

officers attended him in the courtyard before his ascent. But no Spaniard accompanied him to the wall—only two loyal lords of his court. Cortez did not want it to appear that Montezuma was speaking for the Spaniards, but for himself.

The besieging force was surprised to see Montezuma atop the wall, looking out over them. He wore all his royal plumage, and his finest robe, and he was decorated with much jewelry. But he did not look like the man they had known before his arrest by the Spaniards. The sun had been shining when he came onto the wall, and as he addressed those in the street, a cloud scudded over it and hid it. Those present considered it a bad omen.

Montezuma told them that he did not desire any more bloodshed, and there were mutterings among them. He reiterated that he was not a prisoner of the Spaniards, and that he was being treated well. But no one seemed to care. He continued telling them to go home, to lay down their arms, and one day soon the Spaniards would leave the same way they had come, and no more Aztec blood would be spilled.

They began shouting at him.

"You speak with Malinche's tongue!" someone cried.

"You are no longer an Aztec!"

"Coward! Liar!"

"The Spaniards have made you into a woman!"

Never in memory had an Aztec emperor been so defamed by his own people. A man who had been all-powerful a few months before was now reduced to pleading with subjects who insulted and despised him.

Now someone shouted, *"He must die with them!"*

This speech was followed by a hail of stones and

arrows from those nearest the wall, in the heat of a terrible anger. Montezuma, shocked, tried to defend himself, and the lords beside him held their shields before him. The Spaniards manning the cannons at the ends of the wall became nervous at their posts, and Captain Sandoval, peering through a small opening in the gate turned to where Cortez and Marina and the others were gathered in the courtyard.

"They're attacking him!" Sandoval said loudly.

Cortez had seen the few arrows and stones that came over the wall, and now was scowling darkly. "*Get him down from there!*" he now yelled. "*Get him down!*"

An arrow had already grazed Montezuma's side, and now, as more missiles came, he was struck solidly on the head by a stone from a sling. He gasped, and toppled to the feet of the lords trying to protect him. One of them was now hit by an arrow, and also collapsed on the wall.

"*Get him down!*" Cortez shouted.

Two Spaniards had ascended the wide ladder, and were dragging Montezuma from the wall and out of harm's way. The crowd outside stopped its attack, and a sudden silence fell over them, as they realized that they had struck their own emperor down. Montezuma was helped down into the courtyard, the nobles were brought back down, and there were many scowling faces among the Spaniards as they looked upon the wounded Montezuma. Blood ran from his side, and down his face from his hair. He was only semi-conscious.

Marina ran to him, hysterical. "Oh, holy Mary! What have we done? What have we done?"

In moments a litter was brought, and Cortez

ordered Montezuma returned to his suite, to be put under the care of the Spanish physician and Father Olmedo. By the time he got there, Montezuma had lapsed into a coma, and his condition appeared critical.

Cortez had made his last attempt to effect peace in the capital, and had miscalculated. He had forced the angry siege force into a personal attack on their nominal emperor—a thing from which there was no returning. Now Montezuma might as well be dead. He had lost all standing with the people and the royal council.

And he could no longer be used by Cortez.

If Cortez had any lingering doubts as to the course of action left open to him, it was resolved in the next few days, as Montezuma lay badly wounded in his suite, with Marina going to him regularly. On the day following the attack on the emperor, another general attack was made on the Spanish quarters, and this time it lasted for several hours, and was organized under the direction of Aztec warlords. Guatemozin was not seen, but it was known that he was behind it. This time the gate was temporarily breached, and a number of Aztec warriors got inside the courtyard. There was temporary fighting in there, with guns going off in Aztec faces, and crossbows piercing bronze chests. Finally, though, they were driven back and the gate was repaired.

Cortez made a last show of strength, however, on the next day. Angered by the breaching of his defenses, he led another sortie from their fortress, taking large numbers of Tlaxcalans this time, and setting cannon at the gate to clear his way. His detachment marched to the great square near the

Royal Palace, and, while under fierce attack from all sides, climbed the steps of the Great Temple and set fire to the wooden towers atop it. This caused great anguish among the Aztecs surrounding them, and as Cortez' force made its way back to headquarters, the enemy fell on them from all sides, and the fervor of the Aztec warriors in their beast-and-bird head-dresses was even greater than that of the Tlaxcalans in their brave fight against the Spaniards. The Aztecs were better organized and more intelligent in their attack. This time many Indian allies and a number of Spaniards fell under the savage assault, and Cortez at the head of the column was fighting off Aztecs at every turn and battling for his very life. When they finally fought their way back into the headquarters, they were a ragged, demoralized group, and Cortez knew with finality that they had to leave Tenochtitlan.

During those two days, Cortez had had his men work on knocking down the wall in the remote wing of the palace that housed most of the Aztec treasury, and now it was uncovered, and there was a moment of excitement among the troops. Cortez had uncovered, under Montezuma's direction, large amounts of gold and silver—the treasure that most of the conquerors had come to Mexico for—and Cortez promised them that, when they had the booty safe at San Juan de Ulua, all would receive a share. But for the moment, there were matters more urgent to consider. There were already those who were murmuring that there was no possibility of leaving Tenochtitlan with their skins, let alone the gold.

In that darkest of times for Cortez, he could not honestly say their fears were false. It was clear that the Aztecs were now intent on murdering every

Spaniard. They had destroyed all bridges across the causeway gaps, and with the news of that action came real dismay on the part of the soldiery. This was what they had feared—the ones who had come first with Cortez—from the moment they had set foot in the capital—that the Aztecs would trap them there, and then be free to wreak vengeance on them at their leisure.

In those last dark days of June, Cortez and his officers huddled in secret meetings behind closed doors, and Cortez' men built a wooden war-wagon inside the courtyard at his instructions, and tension hung in the air like a cloud. Montezuma was getting worse, rather than better, and it appeared he might succumb to his injury. If that happened, Cortez knew, all restraint among the Aztecs would be gone.

So he planned a retreat from Tenochtitlan, and through the planning he grew more and more moody, because he had never before known defeat or withdrawal, nor had any of those under him. He was angry every hour of the day, and he spoke again of executing Alvarado for inciting the Aztecs to this height of frenzy, and he would not even speak to Marina, except on business. With the baby growing inside her, it was all very unnerving to her, and she kept to her room most of the time and listened with anxiety to the hammering in the courtyard, where the war-wagon was now almost completed, and workers were starting on portable wooden bridges to carry with them.

Several things happened very quickly, leading to the departure of the Spaniards. First, Cortez sent out his war-wagon with a crew of workers, and from behind the relative safety of its wooden barricades, a detachment made its way by some small miracle to

two bridges of the nearest causeway, with arrows and missiles raining all around them, and labored to fill in the gaps made by the destroyed bridges. Several Spaniards were killed in this action, and many wounded, before the lumbering, wooden-wheeled wagon, drawn by soldiery within the protection of its wooden facades, returned to its base. The mission accomplished little, because the Aztecs immediately set about dredging the rock and lumber fill from the openings, negating the work done.

Then, as final plans were being made to march, Montezuma began failing. Marina, hearing of his worsening condition, went to see him immediately, and he received her gratefully. It was mid-evening when she arrived in his sleeping quarters, and Netoza and Linala were both there, with two nobles who guarded him. When Linala saw Marina, she rose in anger.

"You dare come here!" she said loudly to Marina.

Netoza, Montezuma's favorite wife, sat by his pallet-bed impassively, staring at an opposite wall. Montezuma turned to see Marina. His face was pale, and he breathed with difficulty.

"Please, Linala!" he choked out.

"I will not stay in this room with that woman!" Linala exclaimed. She gave Marina a blistering look, and stormed past her from the room.

Montezuma licked dry lips. "Come, Ce Malinali," he said to Marina.

Marina walked over beside him. Netoza glanced up at her balefully. "Your general did this. Now he dies."

Marina's lip trembled. She bowed three times before his supine figure, and he smiled weakly.

"I'm afraid my wife is right. I have little time left in this world. But I lay no blame. Malinche sought only to save his army from destruction. Now it is too late."

"Don't tire yourself, your majesty," Marina said. "I'll have the general send our physician."

Montezuma shook his head. "It is too late—for medicine. My priests have worked over me—to no avail. I am dead. But I am glad you came. Stay here until it is all over. Under my orders—Netoza will hide you. Later, when our warriors have overrun this place, you can—dress as a harem woman and return to the Royal Palace with them. I will see that—Linala does not betray you—after I am gone."

Marina's eyes were moist, and she felt a tightness in her throat. "Thank you, great emperor. But I must remain with Cortez."

He hesitated, then nodded. "I understand. I expected such a reply from you." He coughed, and there was a rattling in his chest. His hand went to a bandage on the side of his head, and it was clear to Marina that he was in terrible pain.

"I must get you some help!" Marina said urgently, starting to rise from her kneeling position.

But Montezuma lifted a hand, to stop her. "It—is finished. May the gods—save you, princess. Netoza."

Netoza leaned forward to hear his gasping words. "Yes, my lord?"

He opened his mouth one last time, as if to say farewell, but no sound came out. There was a low gurgling sound in his throat, and the emperor's head fell aside, his dark eyes still staring at the floor.

"God in heaven!" Marina muttered. "He is gone!"

It was mid-evening when Marina returned to Cortez and gave him the news of Montezuma's death. Cortez sat on his chair, stunned, for a long while. He and Marina were alone in his office, and all was quiet in the courtyard and in the streets outside the walls. Since Montezuma's being wounded by his own people, the siege forces had dispersed, and at night there was almost nobody out there now. Preparations were being made behind locked doors. Javelins were being sharpened, and the gods consulted.

The Spaniards were in Tenochtitlan on borrowed time.

Mulling that over in his head that evening, with Marina watching him for some reaction to Montezuma's death, Cortez finally turned to her grimly.

"The time has come," he told her.

"Yes?" Marina said.

"We must leave Tenochtitlan before Montezuma's death is generally known."

Marina frowned. "But, Hernando. By early morning—"

"We won't be here in early morning," he interrupted her.

Her mouth fell slightly open.

"We will leave—tonight?"

He nodded. "We will never be more ready. My portable bridges are finished, and I've covered your vans with wood for protection. The city is quiet, with no one outside our gates at the moment. Now is the time for our withdrawal."

Again, Marina had cause to be impressed with Cortez' brilliance. But now, suddenly, her fear for her unborn child obliterated all other thoughts from her head. Even if the Spaniards sneaked away at

night, she knew they would not get far before the city knew what was happening.

"When shall I be ready to go?" she asked him.

Cortez was already on his feet, walking to where his armor hung. "I want to be gone by midnight," he said. "Notify the other women."

She nodded slowly. "Yes, General."

As an afterthought, he turned back to her. "Try to find some heavy quilting for your belly, little mother."

She smiled weakly, trying to hide her fear. "Yes, General."

Within an hour all troops, Indian and Spaniard, were gathering silently in the courtyard. Wagons and carts had been heavily loaded with gold from Montezuma's treasury, so that much equipment had been neglected in the packing. There were still two vans for the women, and they were both boarded-over now on their sides, with canvas covering them. Cannons had been brought down from the wall towers and were ready to be moved. Cavalry horses were saddled and quilted, and musketry was loaded.

By midnight, they were ready.

Cortez rode through the courtyard to the main gate in advance of his horsemen, his face grim. After his victory over Narvaez at Cempoalla, he would never have believed that such a reversal could have taken place in such a brief time. But here he was, on the night of July 1, slinking away into the night, hoping his force would not be slaughtered before it could reach safety outside the city.

At the gate, he turned to Diaz, Sandoval, Aguilar and Jamarillo. Behind them was the released Alvarado, still technically under arrest, but freed to lead his unit of cavalry because he was sorely needed.

"This is a temporary withdrawal," he said soberly to them. "We will be back. I promise you."

Diaz nodded. "Your promise is an honored one, General."

"Now," Cortez said. "Let us see if we can get out of here with our skins intact."

Moments later the big gate swung open. Marina could see it all, from a small window in her van where she waited at the rear of the courtyard, surrounded by Tlaxcalan warriors. There were no Aztecs visible outside, as the sentries had predicted. The streets were dark. The moon had dipped behind a cloud, and the night was very black.

The cavalry went first, and interspersed with those units were small groups of infantry and Indians, hauling the long portable bridges on wooden wheels. There were two of them—not enough for the three gaps in the causeway—but one or both were to be pulled up and used again, after the army had crossed, as the necessity arose.

The clapping of the mounts' hoofs on those night streets and the rumble of the rolling cannons and wagons unnerved the troops who marched along before and behind them, because they feared they would wake the whole city. Marina's van and the other one bearing women came along with the provisions and gold, right after the unit with the first bridge, because Cortez wanted them to cross the causeway first for safety. They had no trouble until they reached the near end of the causeway, and Marina was beginning to think there would be none. But then Aztec sentries posted there saw the approaching Spanish columns, and raised a cry.

The shrill, warbling sound made by the Aztec warriors sent chills down the spines of those

marching to the causeway. Cortez sent a couple of cavalymen to dispatch the sentries, but by then their work was accomplished. Their warning cry was taken up all over the city, and could be heard echoing in the streets, above the rumbling noise of the moving army.

Cortez ignored the warning and moved his first unit onto the causeway. The first bridge was laboriously moved along to the first gap, and Sandoval supervised its placement. Although it sat crookedly and left a small gap at each end, it worked quite well. The first unit of cavalry moved across it, and a contingent of infantry and Indians. Then came the supply wagons, the women, and the gold.

But now the balance of the army crowded up in a long, ten-abreast line, waiting to get onto the causeway, and as they did so, a great murmuring sound rose through the dark streets, and the Spaniards knew what it meant. Warriors and citizens were now pouring out of their armories and quarters and residences, racing to the causeway to prevent the escape of their hated enemies.

Within minutes, they arrived. They swarmed onto the columns from all the dark side streets, hurling javelins, shooting arrows and missiles, and ululating their war cry in a blood-chilling chorus.

Cortez and Diaz rode up and down the causeway, exhorting their men to hurry.

"Come on!" Cortez yelled. *"Move faster!"*

But now it was all piling up on them. The second bridge had been bogged down under a ferocious attack just before it reached the causeway, and no one wanted to stay with it to try to get it moving. Infantry and cavalry alike were crowding onto the causeway in panic, hacking at the Aztecs and

bombarded by missiles raining on them from all sides. Tlaxcalans and Totonacs went down under the wild attack that kept mounting in intensity, and many panicked and ran down side streets, or back toward their old headquarters, and were cut down and hacked to pieces away from the main fight.

No Spaniards were foolhardy enough to try such tactics and be cut off from their comrades. They kept crowding up to the end of the causeway, hacking their way forward, stabbing and slicing flesh and maiming as they went. Before many of them could reach the causeway, they were run through by javelins, knocked down with a heavy blow to the face or head, or slashed by the multi-bladed hatchets that some warriors carried.

On the causeway, the Spaniards were attacked on both sides from boats in the water, the Aztecs scrambling up the sides of the embankment faster than the Spaniards could push them back. There were just too many. And the Aztecs were fiercer, more determined, than any Indians they had fought thus far. They would be struck in the side or chest with a sword, fall into the water, and then drag themselves onto the causeway again, bloody and weak, to have another try at their despised enemy. They fought like madmen, with a frenzy not seen before by the Spaniards.

Now the first group of Spaniards and their Indian contingent had reached the second gap in the causeway, at a destroyed bridge, but had no way to get across it. The second portable bridge had bogged down completely before it got onto the causeway, and the first one was stuck in place at the first gap, from the weight of all the men and equipment moving over it. Sandoval and his men labored under

a hail of arrows and javelins to dislodge it, after most of their force had crossed it, but to no avail. It would not budge. Now the main force of the Spaniards and their Indian allies was caught between two broken bridges of the causeway, open to attack from the water on both sides, and from the rear, and nowhere to go forward. From the water, the Aztecs were slowly cutting them to ribbons with an unrelenting sleet of missiles that caught the Spaniards between plates of armor, bringing them down one after the other.

Now real despair rose among the ranks, as they saw one after another of their comrades pulled off the causeway and into the water, bleeding but alive, to be taken captive by the dread Aztec warriors. A yelling began then, of anguish and fear, and some finally panicked and ran back to the city-end of the causeway, and were swarmed on there by the Aztecs. No one thought now of the expedition, or their cause. It was every man for himself in their desperate fight for life. Cavalry pressed forward onto the causeway blindly, trampling down their own brethren, crushing the wounded underfoot. Totonac allies rushed against heavily-armed Spaniards in their flight, knocking them down and making them easy prey for the Aztecs who swarmed onto them.

There was no hope for survival.

All was lost.

But Cortez and a few of his best officers would never admit that that was so. Riding up and down near the second destroyed bridge, Cortez hacked at attacking Aztecs furiously with his broad sword, killing and mutilating. Whenever the enemy recognized him, there would be a concerted effort to get to him. But his cavalry was all around him, including

Diaz and Aguilar, and they fought back-to-back on occasion against the ferocious attack.

"Bring up the wagons!" Cortez now shouted, seeing that they were being slaughtered where they were. *"Fill the gap with equipment! Throw it all in there, into the water! Fill it with ammunition if you have to, or the corpses of your dead comrades! But we must ford these breaches, and now!"*

His orders were passed along, and the wagons rolled on up to the destroyed bridgehead, where about twenty feet of shallow water lay between them and the next section. In the water were hundreds of small boats, bearing Aztec warriors. But the Spaniards ignored them and their missiles, and began dumping everything they could lay hands on into the water. Marina's van was brought up, and the other one with the women, and when it stopped near the bridgehead, suddenly there were twenty Aztecs around it, shouting wildly and tearing at the wood sides. Jamarillo and several cavalymen surrounded the vans and hacked and cut at the warriors, knocking them down one after the other. Two Aztecs pried a wood door open, and Marina and her three horrified companions stared into their painted faces. Marina stabbed into the face of the nearest Aztec, and blinded him, then Jamarillo swung at his head from behind, decapitating the fellow. Marina, hearing the screaming of the women in her ears, and the groans of agony outside the wagon, the shrill cries of the Aztecs and dull prayers of dying Spaniards, raised her own eyes to the dark canvas covering over her and muttered an invocation.

"Dear Mary and Jesus, holy of holies, please protect my child from harm this night!" She trembled, holding the bloody knife. *"I ask nothing for me, only the baby!"*

Just then Cortez' figure appeared outside the van on the white stallion. The stallion was smeared with blood, and Cortez' sword was dripping crimson. He came up beside Jamarillo just as an Aztec was about to drive a javelin into Jamarillo's side, and almost cut the warrior in half with a single swipe of his sword.

"*The vans!*" he now yelled from behind his helmet visor. "*Get them across! Get them across first!*" Then he was gone as quickly as he had come.

The debris that had been thrown into the breach was not really a bridge, but it sufficed, and with the help of a number of brave Spanish soldiers, the vans were pushed and shoved through the shallow water and came up onto the next section of causeway. A few wagons followed, a couple getting stuck, then horsemen crossed over, and infantry. Some had broken open the crates of gold, and had burdened themselves with what they thought was their fair share, and now were so weighted down that they could not move fast, and were killed by the enemy.

Slowly the major part of Cortez' small army forded the second bridgehead, losing men with every delay that occurred. The yelling of the Aztecs, exhilarated by this triumph, was deafening, and the groaning of the wounded and dying was a terrible undercurrent.

Alvarado, who had been given a rear position, fought like a mad man to get his cavalry unit across the ford, and succeeded with most of them. Some were dismounted and thrown into the water, and then carried off triumphantly by Aztec warriors in their pirogues, yelling and kicking as they went.

Now, a few hundred yards further along the dark causeway, Diaz halted before the last destroyed bridge. It was as wide a breach as the last one, the

water looked deeper, and they had used up most of their equipment to plug the previous hole. The only small advantage was that there were fewer attackers at this point, because they were so taken up with killing the enemy further back. Cortez rode up and scowled at the dark water, then gave his last command.

"All right, get across as best you can! Else you will be murdered here!"

A couple of wagons were driven into the water for those crossing to hang onto as they went, and then the cavalry began crossing. The horses plunged and reared in the water, and sank low because of the weight of rider and armor atop them. Some foundered as they tried to reach the far bridgehead, and Aztecs tore horse from rider, slaughtering the animal in the water, and carrying the cavalier off, if he was still alive.

Cortez looked down the way for the vans carrying the women, but could not reach them. His men were plunging into the water now all around him, crying out in terror. *"Bring the vans!"* he yelled. *"Get the women across!"* But then he was forced into the water by his own infantry and wild-eyed Totonacs trying to get off the causeway. He kept aboard his mount, and in moments he was riding the stallion onto the far bridgehead.

Jamarillo had his hands full. Two women had been dragged from the second van, and one taken alive. The other had had her throat slit from ear to ear by a wild Aztec, and then her body was dumped into the lake with all the other corpses that lay floating in that bloody water. Jamarillo and his brave cavaliers hacked and sliced through the attackers, moving the vans forward until they were

within thirty feet of the bridgehead. Then Jamarillo saw that the last breach could not be forded.

"Each of you take a woman!" he yelled above the tumult. *"And get across as best you can!"*

Marina was already stumbling from her van, seeing what lay ahead. The others climbed out after her, and one by one they were lifted aboard the horses of the cavaliers guarding them. Jamarillo rode up to Marina, and held out his hand.

"Quickly, Marina! While we can still go!"

In just a moment, Marina was pulled onto Jamarillo's mount, and he turned and plunged into the water just as a group of Aztecs rushed them. The Aztecs were left on the bridgehead, missing their opportunity, but there were plenty more now in the water. Jamarillo swung his saber at a wading Aztec's shoulder, and the warrior disappeared under the surface of the water. Another grabbed Marina and tried to pull her off the mount, and she plunged her dagger into his heart. They were halfway now, and the mount was swimming, wild-eyed. A pirogue came up beside them, and arrows sung past Marina's head, caromed off Jamarillo's armor, and a third sank into his thigh. But then the horse was climbing onto the dirt embankment at the bridgehead, and gained its footing there. A moment later they were on the last section of causeway that led to shore, and there were few Aztecs near them now. Jamarillo paused a moment to look into the water where they had been, and saw Ordaz being pulled off his horse, with a woman he was carrying. One moment they were there, and then there was a great splashing and kicking, and they were surrounded by Aztecs. Jamarillo and Marina heard the woman scream, and Jamarillo saw Ordaz' head go under as he was

swarmed on by Aztecs. Then Jamarillo wheeled his mount and rode off along the causeway among running, stumbling men on foot, to the far end and dry land.

Back at the second breach, Pedro Alvarado had been unhorsed. His mount lay dying beside him, and he stood surrounded by Spanish infantry, all defending their lives with whatever weapon was available to them. The guns the Spaniards had started out with were now out of ammunition, and there was no time for re-loading, so the soldiery was reduced to the use of lances and swords dropped by dead cavalry and knives. Even crossbows were of no value under these hectic conditions.

Behind this point, there were few Spaniards alive, and the Indian allies who were caught back there were being systematically slaughtered by the Aztecs. Now Alvarado and his rear guard fought savagely for their lives, stumbling over the corpses of comrades and Aztecs alike. And with each minute that passed, more of them were being killed or captured.

A few of the unit had forded the breach without losing their mounts, and they turned now to keep their side of the bridgehead clear for those left behind.

"Come on, Captain!" a cavalier shouted at Alvarado. *"It is now or never!"*

Alvarado turned and saw the man waiting for him, took one last swing at an Aztec warrior, and then took an enormous leap into the water. He landed on some debris six feet away that supported him, the cavalier came into the water to meet him, and then Alvarado was scrambling onto the mount's back, and the cavalier was carrying him toward the

far end of the causeway. A few moments later they would ford the last water successfully, and Alvarado, who had been the chief cause of this *noche triste* was saved from its black vengeance.

Within another half hour, the stragglers of the small army stumbled off the far end of the causeway, and the battle was all but over. As Cortez' foot soldiers left the shore of Lake Texcoco that night there was still some small harassment from Aztec warriors, but it tapered off as they filed brokenly through the perimeters of the city and on into open country. At the far side of the last village, Cortez dismounted and watched the ragged lines of troops pass him. Cavalry mingled with infantry, armor was bent and falling off them, and they were wet and bloody, many of them with wounds that would later prove fatal. Their guns had been lost, and their banners were gone. They were a sorry-looking lot. Half of them had been left behind, as had all the gold that Montezuma had given them. Cortez already knew that Diaz, Aguilar and Marina had been saved, but that caused him no satisfaction in that dark hour. The conqueror who had always before had his emotions under control now stood there on a hillside, with Diaz near him, and let the tears unashamedly roll down his cheeks as he gazed upon the broken remnants of his once-proud little army.

It was a night he would never forget as long as he lived.

Chapter Twelve

The humiliation, though, was not complete.

After a few hours of sleep beset with nightmares, the sorry remnants of Cortez' army moved on eastward the following morning, only to find an organized resistance to their retreat on the plain of Otumba, not far from Tenochtitlan. In another desperate meeting with vengeful Aztecs, they fled through the enemy helter-skelter, almost surrounded at one point, until they broke free beyond them. In this final encounter they lost several more Spaniards and a number of Indian allies, and any morale they might have had left.

By the end of that first day's march from Tenochtitlan, when they finally reached the safety of the foothills, the *conquistadores* were a completely defeated, dispirited group, wanting only to make it back to Tlaxcala with their lives. As they encamped that night in the low hills, far from any Aztec settlement, uppermost in their minds was the memory of their comrades being captured alive on that grim causeway, screaming in terror and agony. Finally, the worst had happened to some of them. They had been taken captive for sacrifice. Even at that moment in Tenochtitlan, they knew, at the Great Temple, the prisoners—a few of whom were

women—would be facing the ugliest kind of horror. There would be mutilations, and other tortures. But most would be saved, in good condition, to walk up the steps of the Great Temple to the sacrificial block. There, stripped of armor and clothing, the Spaniards would be held down by several priests, their backs on the sacrificial stone, and their living hearts would be cut out for sacrifice to Huitzilopotchli and other gods. It was a mental scene that was as responsible for the cloud of gloom that hung over the camp as the recollection of their bloody defeat and decimation on the causeway.

Marina, somehow, had survived the retreat without losing either her baby or her life, and now she felt an elation about being alive that she wanted to share with him—she felt closer to him than ever before, and more in need of his love.

But on that rugged march back to Tlaxcala, over the next few days, Marina's need was frustrated over and over again. Another change was coming over Cortez because of his defeat, and it was a greater one than had occurred in Tenochtitlan when he had begun affecting a godlike manner. Now he had tasted defeat and humiliation of the blackest kind, and it was too great a step downward for him. He became subordinate to it. He began closing himself off to others around him, including Marina. In a small village near Tlaxcala, he got drunk and had a local maiden brought to him, and raped her. Her shrieks could be heard all around the camp. Marina lay in her tent listening and prayed to God that it would be all over soon and that Cortez would be as he was when she first knew him, over a year before.

Their arrival at Tlaxcala was a somber one. The locals had been more or less forced into an alliance

with the Spaniards in the first place, so now they were not eager to receive these defeated aliens back into their midst with open arms. But they were given their temporary headquarters back, and they settled in to lick their wounds.

The rank and file of Spanish soldiery had quite a different reaction to the retreat from their commander. Most wanted nothing more than to get back to San Juan de Ulua and go home. They wanted to put this entire unfortunate enterprise behind them and out of their minds. They had had enough adventure to last them a lifetime, and they had nothing to show for it except scars. It was time to give up the expedition and admit its futility.

But Cortez was already planning his return to the Aztec capital. Incredible as it seemed to many of his men, he intended to rally his forces again, and go back. He had heard rumors of the possible arrival of independent reinforcements from Cuba, and that was all he needed to convince himself that his expedition would yet succeed. A couple of days after moving into headquarters in Tlaxcala, he made such an announcement to his troops, and this time there were many catcalls and cries of derision. Some had already deserted, and now others followed. But Cortez was impervious to any small setbacks. He asked the Tlaxclans for reinforcements, and in a session of the council, they voted to give them to him. Then, in a surprise move, he dismissed all charges against Alvarado, "because of valorous action" in the retreat, and reinstated him with full command of his unit of cavalry.

Marina could not believe it. In a moment of outrage, she went to him, and found him alone in a small office he kept in the headquarters. She had not been asked to sleep with him since *La Noche Triste*,

as some soldiers were now calling it, and had spoken to him only infrequently. It was that he did not have need for her anymore, and she was very hurt. But now her outrage overpowered that lesser pain.

"How dare you!" she said loudly to him, upon entering the room. "How can you reinstate that madman, after what he did to you, and to me?"

Cortez was seated at a table where sheafs of papers were scattered before him. He looked as if she had disturbed him from a deep sleep, yet she knew he had been awake. The too-bright glitter Marina had noticed in his eyes on isolated previous occasions was in them constantly now, it seemed, and it was overlaid with a grim resolution that was unnerving to her.

He looked at her blankly. "What? What are you talking about?"

"I am speaking of Alvarado!" she said. "The coward who raped me as I bore your child inside me, murdered Montezuma, and inflicted humiliation and disgrace upon this expedition!"

"You place great guilt upon his shoulders," Cortez said.

"Does he not deserve it?"

Cortez dropped his gaze to the table. "A man can vindicate himself, after all. He helped us survive at Tenochtitlan."

"He fought for his own life!" Marina cried. "Does that wipe out all his crimes?"

Cortez looked up at her, and his eyes were hard and cold. "If I had had fifty like him on that causeway, we would not have suffered such terrible losses," he said deliberately. "I need Alvarado as much as I need any man—or woman—on this expedition."

"Meaning that you do not need me?"

"Meaning," he scowled, "exactly what I said."

Marina's lip trembled. "Do you care nothing for me or your child? Do you think of me ever, while you are drinking and raping Indian women? Do you concern yourself with anything except this failed expedition?"

Cortez frowned deeply, and rose, and he frightened her a little. "*Failed* expedition? Who says it is failed? Perhaps you don't know that I've just received a confirmation that reinforcements are arriving shortly, and will join us here, under our banner?"

Marina sighed heavily. "No. I did not know."

He went on as if he had not heard her reply. "Those reinforcements, and my new grand plan," he said conspiratorially, "have already saved the expedition!"

"A new grand plan?" she said dully.

He nodded, his cheeks blazing. "I have just confided it to my captains." He came around the table, his hands folded behind him. "The reason we were strategically prisoners in Tenochtitlan," he said grimly, "was because of the causeways and the lake. When I return, with a larger, better-equipped force, I'll also control Lake Texcoco. And, controlling the lake, I'll command the causeways and threaten the city."

"How can you control the lake, General?" she asked sourly.

He leaned toward her, and she did not like the look in his eyes. "With my own brigantine galleons!" he said harshly.

She regarded him dubiously, wondering if he had, indeed, gone mad. "Your galleons are on the ocean, General. Not at Lake Texcoco."

"Exactly," he said, grinning a harsh grin. "But, starting in just a few days, my girl, I'm dismantling most of them. Taking them apart!"

"Dismantling—"

The harsh grin widened. "That's right. Then we'll carry them overland to Lake Texcoco, put them back together there, and float them on the inland Aztec sea!"

Marina's eyes narrowed. Maybe it did take a certain madness for real genius. But if so, she was finding it ever more difficult to live with.

"Surely such a task would be impossible," she said evenly, "considering the difficult terrain lying between the coast and Lake Texcoco."

"Not impossible, Indian maiden," he said brightly. "Only troublesome. I've already contracted with the council here to obtain labor for the job."

She hesitated, then nodded. "I'm impressed, General. You always were good at the impossible. It is unfortunate for me that your affection doesn't equal your strategic brilliance."

His face changed. "I've been busy, Marina. There are many things that weigh heavily on my shoulders. I—"

There was a knock on the door behind her, and when it opened, a young officer stood there with a bright-eyed Tlaxcalan girl.

"Ah, I didn't know you were busy, General. This is the girl you asked about."

Marina studied the Indian girl angrily for a moment, then turned back to Cortez. "I see how busy you've been!" she said hostilely to him. "And now you no longer need Montezuma as an excuse!"

Before he could reply, she turned and fled past the officer and the girl, and ran down the corridor to the

room where she slept. Just before she entered it, Jamarillo saw her, and followed her inside. She was sobbing when he closed the door behind him. They were alone in the room.

"You came from him," he said to her. "What has he done to you now?"

She shook her head, faced away from him. "He is not the same man that I loved a year ago! It is all different now!"

Jamarillo sighed heavily, and came up behind her, touching her affectionately. "I know," he said.

She turned to him. "He has reinstated Alvarado!"

Jamarillo nodded. "I heard this morning. Diaz advised against it, but the general isn't listening to his advisors anymore. He's going to tear his ships apart and take them to Lake Texcoco."

"He told me," Marina said dully. "He talks of ships and arms and sleeps with local girls. But he never sees me."

"Aguilar agrees with me," Jamarillo said softly, "that the restoration of Alvarado's commission is an insult to you personally, and to every Indian on this isthmus. I went to him to complain, but was told that he was too busy to see me."

Marina was still crying. "I thought it would be so wonderful, with his child! Oh, I am so miserable, dear Juan!"

Jamarillo came close to her, and put his hands around her waist, gently. "All I want is your comfort and happiness. It hurts me inside to see you like this. If only—"

She looked up into his handsome face, with its dark beard and deep eyes. "If only what, my friend?"

Jamarillo hesitated, then continued awkwardly. "If only—you could find it in your heart—to return

my great affection for you, Malin princess."

Marina brushed at her cheek. "I owe you my life three-fold," she said to him. "Maybe I owe you more than—him."

"Oh, Marina!" he said quietly. Impulsively, he drew her tight against him and pressed his lips to hers. Marina, not knowing how she would respond, suddenly found herself returning the kiss, caressing his mouth with hers urgently, seeking the affection that she could not find with Cortez.

"Juan!" she breathed unevenly into his ear. "I shouldn't be doing this! I belong to the general."

Jamarillo let his right hand move up onto her breast, and he began caressing her gently there, and she did not stop him. "Do you?" he said softly.

She could not affirm the statement, though. She thought of the Indian girl in the doorway of Cortez' quarters, and in her mind the face of Linala was superimposed on the Indian girl's. She saw Jamarillo's mouth close to hers again, and she closed the small distance between their lips, and this time he was kissing her hungrily, passionately.

Somehow, in those next few minutes, they fell onto the low pallet-bed that stood near them, and then Marina's breasts were exposed to him, and she thrilled to the fiery touch of his lips on them.

"Oh! Oh, Juan!"

"Oh, God, my sweet Marina!" he breathed to her.

She received him eagerly then, and there was a gentle union that sent waves of pleasure rippling through her and up into her spine, and in that half-moment of arousal she realized with a small guilt that the general had never begun quite so well.

Jamarillo was not just satisfying his lust, as Cortez had always done. He wanted to give her

satisfaction, also, as a measure of his affection for her, and he was succeeding beyond his expectations. In those next incendiary moments she enjoyed the methodical and deliberate excitation of her desire by Jamarillo, a loving titillation of the flesh as he caressed and touched and probed her, until finally her cries of sensual fulfillment echoed in the darkened room, and she clutched him to her feverishly with a wild abandon she had not known previously, and as gasping, ragged sounds came from the depths of her throat, they came together in a spasmodic release that sent shudders of gratification trembling through her.

When it was finished, tears were standing in Marina's eyes, and Jamarillo was surprised.

"What is it, dear heart?" he asked with concern.

Marina shook her head, her black hair framing her flushed face on the pallet. "Nothing, my beautiful Juan," she said quietly. "Only that you love me."

Chapter Thirteen

In the weeks that followed, Marina found herself in a very emotional period. She still felt a strong loyalty toward Cortez and, deep down inside, she still loved him. But that love had been abused, and things could never be quite the same between them. A part of her, she knew, would always love Cortez. But when Jamarillo had made love to her something had happened inside her. Something had been freed, something that felt affection for Jamarillo as well as Cortez, something that demanded her freedom of choice in love, now that she was a free woman.

Jamarillo wanted to go to Cortez and tell him what had happened between him and Marina, but Marina deterred him. She said that Cortez was overloaded with problems already, and that any further irritation might serve to aggravate him further. So Jamarillo reluctantly agreed to keep quiet about their intimacy, and Marina gave him no encouragement that it would occur again. But Jamarillo knew now that his love was returned in some measure, and that was enough for him. He loved Marina as he had never loved any other woman, and he would continue loving her, even if he had to share her with Cortez.

The reinforcements from Cuba arrived in August, as rumored, two shiploads of them, independent adventures whose purpose in coming to Mexico was to join the now famous Cortez. Cortez accepted their fealty eagerly, and assimilated them into his veterans who had not deserted him, and suddenly he had a force of six hundred men again, with ammunition for musketry and several more cannons to make up for losses on his withdrawal from Tenochtitlan. Work began on the brigantines at San Juan de Ulua, and Cortez made regular sorties out into the high plains villages controlled by Aztecs, testing his new army against them. One village after another was destroyed by his fresh troops, and, because most of them had not been through *La Noche Triste*, they were eager, as fall came, to march to Tenochtitlan.

Also, as these small district towns fell to the Spaniards, Tlaxcalans and Cholulans now swarmed to recruitment in ever larger numbers, swelling Cortez' Indian ranks. The Tlaxcalan king himself, Xicotencatl, volunteered to head a force of Tlaxcalans for Cortez, and Cortez quickly accepted.

In December, he announced that they were ready to march.

Marina heard the news on an overcast afternoon, and went to Cortez immediately. He had just dismissed several officers from his quarters, and was alone. He invited her in with a broad, hard grin.

"Well, well! My Marina deigns to favor me with her company! It seems we do not see much of each other nowadays, little mother!"

Marina shook her head. "We have both been very busy, it seems, Hernando," she replied quietly. Since her intimacy with Jamarillo, Cortez had called her to

him only twice. She had allowed him to make love to her on those occasions, but it had not been the same. It seemed that his love for her had diminished as his hatred for the Aztecs had increased, and she was very sensitive to this. There had been a concurrent cooling of her affection for Cortez as she saw more and more of the buoyant Jamarillo. Jamarillo had tried to make love to her only once since that first time, but there was an interruption before she could decide whether or not to permit it, and he had not tried since.

Neither Cortez nor Jamarillo felt they might safely make love to her at this point, because she was so large with Cortez' child.

Cortez touched her swollen belly now, under her Spanish dress, and grinned. "It won't be long now, eh, princess?"

Marina did not return the smile. Cortez had shown less interest in his child than he would in the delivery of an extra cannon to his headquarters.

"No," she said. "Not long. And that is why I have come to you, General."

His brow furrowed. "Yes?"

"My value to you as interpreter is now limited," she said, avoiding his eyes. "Aguilar and others are learning Nahuatl very quickly, and the enemy has some knowledge of Spanish. And there seems to be very little other reason for my being at your side."

Cortez made a face. "Marina—"

"Because of my baby, therefore, I believe I should stay here in Tlaxcala with the small garrison you will leave here. I'll have the child here, and perhaps join you later."

Cortez' eyes narrowed on her. "This is not like

you. Why would you not wish to be present on our return to Tenochtitlan? It can't be the baby. You know I'll keep you safe."

Marina sighed heavily. "It is not entirely the child. You dishonor me, General, in allowing Alvarado to march with you. The cavaliers joke about it. Jamarillo has heard them, and stopped them."

Cortez was standing near his working table. He came over nearer her. "You have been seeing a lot of Jamarillo."

Marina shot him a hard look. "Do you object?"

He shook his head. "No. If it were not for Juan, I would not still have you with me. But please remind him, for me. You are still my woman."

She met his gaze, and it was a serious one. "Am I?" she asked abruptly. "Am I any more special than the various Indian and Spanish women that you sleep with? Will I ever have one-tenth the importance to you that your revenge on the Aztecs has, or your dreams of glory here?"

His look turned hard. "You judge me harshly, Dona Marina."

"Not as harshly as Montezuma would, if he were still alive!" she said emotionally. "Although he considered you his friend, right up to the moment you killed him!"

Cortez looked as if he might strike her for a moment, then turned away without speaking, his fists clenched at his sides.

Marina went on, in a softer voice. "Something has happened between us, General, and it has to do with what is between you and the natives of my home land. I think it would be good for both of us if we were separated for a while."

Cortez turned back to her with a hard look. "And you want, perhaps, for me to allow Jamarillo to remain here with you, so that he may woo you behind my back!"

Marina's cheeks flushed, and she almost confessed her affair with Jamarillo to him. "I make no request for anyone but myself!" she said angrily.

Cortez looked down, his beard glinting in a ray of dull sunlight. When he spoke again, he was still looking at the floor. "I will not order you to come with us. But I will need you at Tenochtitlan. Cuitlahua has succumbed to an illness, and our friend Guatemozin is the new emperor. He has the council behind him, and he says he will resist a second invasion to the last Aztec man. He has renounced my tie with Quetzalcoatl, and has declared this a holy war. When the time comes to talk with him and his priests, I'll need someone there who will catch every nuance of meaning. That someone would be you."

"General, I—"

But he interrupted her. "Alvarado will stay here. To supervise the transportation of the brigantines."

She looked up at him. "Truly?"

He acted nettled. "Would I say it, if it were not true?"

Marina reflected on that for a moment. "And you want me with you?"

"I would not ask you, if I did not want you!" he said rather loudly. "Why must women everywhere be the same?" He strode across the room militantly. "Will you go, or stay?"

Marina took in a deep breath. "Since you need me, I will go."

His face changed, and he turned to her. "Excellent. Now, pick out a servant from the Indian women to help you until the child is born."

"Very well, General."

"And come to see me occasionally," he added, petulantly, "even though we cannot be intimate. There is no one I can talk to but you. Not really."

Marina searched his somber face, and felt something softening inside her for him. But she remembered all that had happened recently, and caught herself.

"I—will be available, at any time, Hernando," she said quietly to him.

Shortly after that meeting between Cortez and Marina, the army moved out of Tlaxcala and started out once again for Tenochtitlan. It was a large, cumbersome force in comparison with what he had had at his disposal on that first approach to the Aztec capital, and they moved more slowly. There were a few Aztec garrisons on the route to be disposed of, and a couple of small skirmishes at villages along the route, but then all Aztec troops were pulled back for defense of the capital. At that second village, after the minimal fighting between Spanish-led Tlaxcalans and fierce Aztec defenders, while the army rested overnight before moving on to the Tenochtitlan suburb of Iztapalapan, Marina went into labor and had her baby.

It all happened from sunset to just past midnight, and then the Tlaxcalan midwife delivered a squalling, olive-skinned son to Marina. Jamarillo, who had been wounded during the day's fighting and carried his left arm in a sling, was outside Marina's tent all through her labor, while the rest of the camp

celebrated the Spanish victory, and he was the first one to see Marina, after the midwife and a couple of the Spanish women, when the son of Cortez was born. He came to Marina's cot tenderly, and touched her damp brow with his good hand, and she saw a wetness in his dark eyes.

"Thank God," he said emotionally. "Both you and your baby are all right!" He looked at the infant. "He is quite beautiful."

She touched the hand he held on her. "Dear Juan. I—almost wish it were your child."

"The general has been advised," Jamarillo told her. "He will be around shortly."

They both looked over to where the baby lay in a box-crib, near her cot. The child had been washed, but the cord had not yet been cut. He was a robust-looking boy, with a scattering of dark brown hair. It clenched pink fists in the air and made little sounds in its throat.

"What will his life here be?" Jamarillo wondered.

"I don't know," Marina said, "but I hope he finds a better world than the present one."

A few minutes later, when Jamarillo had left to attend to his duties, Cortez arrived without warning. He had an aide with him, and walked into the tent brusquely, still talking business. The aide entered with him.

"It is the garrison at Iztapalapan that will give us trouble," Cortez was saying. "We must make an impression on them there. We must show Guatemozin that this will not be like the last time."

"Our scouts report, General—"

But now Cortez waved his aide to silence, and put a wide smile on his square face. "Ah! The new

mother!" He strode over to Marina's cot without even looking at the new baby, and leaned down and kissed her. "How are you feeling, dear Marina?"

"Well, General," she replied. "I've given you a son, and he is healthy and strong."

Cortez looked over at the baby. "Well, well. So you have, and so he is. Hmmp! A fine-looking boy, I must say! The little rascal has my nose, don't you think?"

He grinned widely at Marina, and the aide laughed. Marina smiled weakly. "I think there is a resemblance, General."

"Of course there is," Cortez said, coming and sitting down on the edge of the cot. He did not dismiss the aide, but allowed him to stay while they talked. He touched Marina's cheek with his lips. "I am glad you're well. We'll be here a couple of days, so you'll have some time to regain your strength."

"Are you pleased with him, General?" Marina asked him, trying to ignore the presence of the aide across the small tent. "Do you like your new son?"

"I am very proud," Cortez told her in a conspiratorial tone. "I have already arranged for his safekeeping here, with some Tlaxcalans I'm leaving here in the village."

Marina had not thought about leaving her baby so soon. She looked past Cortez to the gurgling infant in the crib. "I can't take him with me?"

Cortez put on a stern face. "A baby in this war? I think not, my dear. He will receive good care, and when all this is behind us, you will be reunited with him."

Marina wondered why he had said, "you" rather than, "we".

"I hardly know him yet," she said softly.

"There will be time," he assured her. "Later. After we have conquered Tenochtitlan. Now rest, Marina. I'll want you with me when we move out. As usual."

"Yes," Marina said flatly. "As usual."

Cortez turned and, gesturing for the aide to follow him, strode to the tent door. Marina called after him.

"Our child. What Christian name shall he bear?"

Cortez turned back blankly, as if the thought had not previously occurred to him. He shrugged, after a moment. "Whatever pleases you, Malin mother. I leave it entirely up to you!" With a flourish of his hand, and a tight grin, he turned and was gone.

Marina's heart was broken by Cortez' callousness. His quick arrangement to leave the baby at the village seemed to her an effort on his part to get the infant out of the way as quickly as possible, so that Marina's services to him would not be interrupted. Jamarillo was angered by his behavior, and volunteered to speak with Cortez about it, but Marina dissuaded him. She felt more and more distant from the general, and less disposed to complain. It was not the same as it had been with him. And she began to understand that it might never be again.

Her heart was made even heavier, of course, when she was compelled to part with her newborn child. She already loved him so much that it tore her apart inside to think of leaving him in the care of others, even temporarily. But she knew that the danger would be great to him if she took him with her, and that having him with her would be a selfishness on her part. So, when they moved out a couple of days

later, her son was left behind.

All the way to Texcoco and then on to Iztapalapan she rode silently in her van, avoiding conversation with other women, thinking only of her baby, wondering whether he was being cared for properly. Jamarillo came to her regularly, assuring her about the child, and with each visit she came to look upon him with more and more affection. She knew that Cortez' problems were greater than those of Jamarillo, and his goals different, but she could not understand nor justify the great disparity between Cortez' concern for her, and that of Jamarillo. The only answer she had was that Cortez was very unlike Jamarillo or any other of his officers, and she wondered if anybody really knew exactly what he was, including Cortez himself.

As for the army, when it reached Iztapalapan it was ripe for combat. Cortez halted outside the town gates and, during his encampment there, he made two demands for the Aztec garrison to surrender, but received no reply. Guatemozin was already gearing for defense, in his suburbs. The Aztecs were ready this time. There would be no surrender, no compromise. The invaders would be met and annihilated.

There was no alternative.

Cortez' troops took the lack of response from the Aztecs as an insult. Most of his men had not been through the horror of *La Noche Triste* and had little respect for the Aztecs as yet. They also had not lived among them, so held no concern for them as human beings. They were out for blood, and Cortez, sensing that he must encourage this momentum, lined his Spanish troops up on a gray afternoon preceding

their assault on the town, and spoke to them. He told them that the Aztecs were savages whose extermination would leave the Valley of Mexico a better place, and he listed the terrible practices of their religion, demanding vengeance for the death and humiliation of the night of retreat. He went too far, allowing his new, crazed hatred of the Aztecs carry his remarks to an extreme. Diaz tried to interrupt him, but Cortez waved him aside. When he had finished, Jeronimo Aguilar stalked out of the compound in disgust.

Marina had not heard the speech, but Jamarillo had, and he went to Cortez to protest, since it gave the troops a license to kill wantonly. But Cortez listened to him for barely a moment, then cut him off, telling him that he was only protecting his men by warning them of the true nature of their enemy.

The next morning, Cortez ordered the attack on the town.

There was no need to use his entire force against this suburb, but Cortez held only a smaller part of them back. He picked his fiercest Tlaxcalan warriors for the attack, armed a large segment of his infantry with muskets and pistols, and readied most of his cavalry. Diaz declined to take his unit in, because of the emotional state of the new troops, but Aguilar and Jamarillo were forced to take part.

At a signal from a trumpet, on that early morning in January of the new year of 1521, Cortez commanded his infantry to charge the town walls. All through the night, citizens had been evacuating their homes, fleeing to Tenochtitlan, but there were still many left when the attack began. The Aztecs came out to meet the invaders in their war robes and headdresses, and their shrill battle cries rang across

the opening between the opposing forces. But when the charge was made against them, they were quickly overwhelmed by guns and wild, savage Tlaxcalans, who seemed enraged by the very sight of their traditional enemies. The Aztecs fought bravely and well, but they were soon falling back to the town wall, and many did not make it there. As they started to fall back, the cavalry came swooping down on them, many of the cavaliers veterans of the great retreat, with blood in their eyes. The result was reckless slaughter. Aztec bodies and wounded were spread thickly over the ground before the walls. Cannons opened fire on the ramparts, and soon the wall crumbled in several places, and the infantry and Tlaxcalans swarmed into the town, killing any warrior they found, and wantonly murdering any citizen found on the streets.

Jamarillo was in the middle of it, and within a few minutes of their entering the town, it was clear to him that the Aztec warriors were defeated and the battle was over. Some truce flags went up, but the infantry shot down the Aztecs who held them. There was to be no quarter, their commander had made that clear.

But when all the garrison was massacred, it was not over. Now the Tlaxcalans, and many Spanish infantrymen, were storming into buildings and private residences, killing whomever they found there—men, women, and children.

Jamarillo saw what was happening, and ordered his cavalry to fall back to the town walls. Aguilar had done the same, but the fresh infantry troops were momentarily out of control, rushing into house after house, and slaughtering the inhabitants. The

Tlaxcalans went crazy with lust for blood. Jamarillo rode among them, trying to stop them, but the impact of Cortez' inflammatory speech was being felt on all involved in the assault. Women were dragged from their small houses, and babies torn from their arms, then both were killed unceremoniously. Jamarillo saw a child spitted on a Tlaxcalan's lance as he held it in the air. Nearby, several Tlaxcalans stood over an unfortunate Aztec woman, hacking her to pieces.

It was not just the Tlaxcalans, either. Spaniards were shooting old men and women, and impaling them on their lances. One bloodthirsty newcomer strode arrogantly along the street with an infant hanging on his saber above his head. On a street, a small knot of blood-smeared soldiers was busy nailing a girl's hands and feet to the hard ground with sharp-pointed knives, preparatory to raping her.

Jamarillo, blazing with rage, rode into the group pell-mell, knocking them down. "*Leave her, damn you!*" he yelled hoarsely at them. "*Fall back to the gates, the battle is over!*"

The musketeers dispersed, and Jamarillo ordered another soldier nearby to free the girl. But there was too much going on to try to stop all of it. It was savage and brutal. Screams rent the air, and the wild laughter of men, and the acrid odor of gunsmoke mingled with the cloying smell of blood.

Jamarillo tried to find Cortez, but could not see him in the melee. Other cavalry officers were now riding among the Spanish infantry and Tlaxcalans, ordering them to desist. Jamarillo even saw one officer swing a saber onto the neck of one man who

refused to obey. Finally the Spaniards were all called back, but the Tlaxcalans were too many in number to halt immediately. When they were finally gotten under control, there were few Aztecs alive in Iztapalapan. Smoke curled high into the sky from burning buildings, and corpses lay everywhere in the debris. There were evidences of mutilations, torture-killings, and rape. Everything of value had been carried off, and the Spaniards were showing their loot to each other at the gates, trading and selling off gold and silver trinkets.

Jamarillo finally found Cortez inside the western gate of the town, still astride his mount, several grim-faced cavalry officers surrounding him. Cortez was somber, but not aroused. He appeared to Jamarillo to be quite content with the way things had gone. One of the young officers was reporting the massive killings and pillage to Cortez as Jamarillo rode up. Jamarillo interrupted him without preliminary.

"Are you satisfied?" he yelled at his general.

Cortez turned darkly to him. He held his helmet in his hand, and his face and beard were sweaty. "Are you addressing me, Captain?"

Aguilar now rode up behind Jamarillo, and he, too, was grim-faced. "It is an outrage!" he muttered so that the others could hear him.

"Yes, General, I address you!" Jamarillo said loudly. *"Are you pleased with what you have wrought here?"*

Sandoval, sitting tall in his saddle, moved his mount over near Jamarillo. He had seen that a number of cavaliers and also foot soldiers had turned to listen to Jamarillo's words. "Jamarillo. Perhaps later."

Jamarillo whirled on him. "*No, not later! It would not be honorable to wait until later!*"

Cortez settled himself in his saddle. He already realized that he had set a demon loose at Iztapalapan, but the fury of killing there fed something new inside him, something that had been born deep in his gut at the retreat from Tenochtitlan. "All right, Captain," he said bleakly, "get it said."

Jamarillo glared at him. "We tried to tell you! But you wanted blood!" He turned to a cavalier who had come up with him, and the soldier came forward on his mount, carrying something. It was a naked infant, long dead, that had been stabbed over and over with a knife or sword. Its small body was covered with blood, and badly mutilated. Jamarillo took the figure from his cavalier, and held it up so that all could see it.

"*Now you have blood!*" he cried out at Cortez.

A dark muttering rippled through the men present.

"Holy Mary!" Aguilar murmured quietly.

"Maybe you would like this as a trophy!" Jamarillo went on. "To wave above our heads on our expedition banner!"

Cortez silently returned Jamarillo's grim stare. Jamarillo lowered the small corpse, and it was taken from him by a man on the ground. A heavy silence hung over the assemblage for several minutes, then Cortez spoke.

"I forgive the insults, Captain, as you are obviously in an emotional state," he began evenly. "I regret the excesses that occurred here this morning as much as you or any other man in this expedition. Our vengeance should have been restrained to the

soldiery, and I'll make sure that rule is understood in future confrontations."

Jamarillo slumped in his saddle now, the emotion drained from him.

"The important thing, however," Cortez went on deliberately, "is that a military victory was won here today, one that may cause Guatemozin second thoughts about his resistance to our righteous cause."

Jamarillo stared hard at him. "*Important thing! Righteous cause?* Good God! What is more important than our honor? And what is righteous about torture, murder and rape?"

One of the infantrymen who had been on that causeway on their dark night now spoke up loudly, from the ranks of men around them. "You concern yourself for these bloody savages, after what you saw at Tenochtitlan? And knowing what horror our captured comrades lived through, before their hearts were cut from their living bodies?"

Aguilar turned toward the soldier, darkly. "Shut your foul mouth, soldier! We do not measure ourselves by the Aztecs!"

"Hear, hear," a cavalry officer near Jamarillo said quietly.

Cortez moved his mount closer to Jamarillo, and leaned forward in his saddle. "I gave no orders for murder or rape, Captain. You were as much in charge of what happened this morning as any of us here. If you insist on placing blame on others, your value to the expedition must of necessity be negated. Do you understand me, Captain Jamarillo?"

Jamarillo glared at him. "Are you asking for my resignation, General? If so, you have it!"

"Jamarillo!" Sandoval protested to him.

Cortez grunted. "Your resignation is your business, Captain. Do what you will in that regard. But in the meantime, remember who is in charge!"

Before Jamarillo could make further reply, Cortez turned his mount and rode off, leaving Jamarillo and the others sitting there glumly.

By noon, it was known that almost six thousand civilians of both sexes and all ages had been wantonly slaughtered at Iztapalapan.

It was the worst Spanish atrocity of the expedition.

And it served a notice on Tenochtitlan that could not be ignored.

Chapter Fourteen

Guatemozin sat grimly on the throne of Anahuac in the great hall of the Royal Palace. Surrounding him were a dozen lords of his royal council. Three of them, generals in the Aztec army, wore their quilted chest armor, and long bronze blades hung from their hide belts.

They were discussing the sack of Iztapalapan. Guatemozin wore royal plumage on his headdress, and other ornamentation of kingship. He was emperor now, and the most powerful man in all Mexico. He listened now, as the taller of the three generals made a supplemental report to him about Iztapalapan.

"A child of your cousin, your majesty, was allowed to live," he said in a low growl. "Its eyes were stabbed out, its tongue excised from its mouth, and its arms severed."

An elder clucked his tongue. "They are not like us. They are barbarians."

Guatemozin glanced at him. "Without their bronze-skinned allies, they are nothing. That is something we must all understand, and quickly. If they had not traded on their mystical tales and trickery to raise a revolution in our own land against

us, we would be feeding their hearts to our gods already. They must be treated as just another tribe, one with advanced weapons. When we have whittled their allies down to manageable size, the Spaniards will fall into our hands like ripe ears of corn. Then we will see whose gods are most powerful."

A robed dignitary near Guatemozin grunted in his throat. "Theirs did not help the captives last July. I can still hear their screams in my ears as they saw the vision of Huitzilopotchli. Now we will have more Spanish hearts to satisfy the hunger of that wrathful deity."

Guatemozin nodded. "We are many, and they are required to fight on our territory. We are defending our homes. Surely we need no more motivation to show them the mettle of the Aztec warrior. They have shown us that they will show no mercy, so we will respond accordingly. No one of them will survive this encounter if we prevail. They will either die on the field of battle, or in the mouth of Huitzilopotchli."

"We will fight until no Aztec stands, if it is necessary to defeat these devils!" a second general exclaimed.

There was a murmur of approval among them, then the tall general spoke again. "There is a rumor that they bring their giant boats to Lake Texcoco, Emperor. Is there a means to stop them?"

Guatemozin shook his head. "We will not divide our forces by charging into the mountains to destroy boats. Let them bring their boats to our great lake, and we will sink them as quickly as they put them into the water." He turned to the third general, a short, brawny Aztec in his thirties with a scar across

his right cheek from his participation in *La Noche Triste*. "What is the latest report on the present disposition of the enemy?"

"They have marched to Xaltocan, to the north of us, your highness," the fellow replied. "But another segment of their army is circling to the south, toward Cuernavaca and Xochimilco. We think they may have taken Xaltocan, but we undoubtedly made them pay a high price."

Guatemozin nodded. "That is our strategy. Keep cutting away at them as they approach until their numbers are reduced. Then, we will turn loose our full fury on them when they arrive at our gates, at a time when they believe strongly in their invincibility."

"Do you want the garrisons at Cuernavaca and Xochimilco strengthened?" the tall general asked.

Guatemozin turned to him. "Just enough to make the white-skins pay dearly for taking them. I want them to come to our very gates, and I want to bleed them as they come. Then we will unleash the wrath of a great city upon them."

"It shall be done, great emperor," the tall general said with emphasis.

"When it is finished," the second general said solemnly, "there will not be enough pale-skins alive to sate the appetites of our gods!"

"Their hearts will stuff the mouth of Huitzilopotchli," a gray-haired, brown-skinned elder said emphatically, "and their skins will decorate the towers of the Great Temple."

Guatemozin nodded. "Let it be so," he said.

Sandoval, with a detachment of cavalry and a sizeable company of Indian allies, took Xaltocan

with little trouble. Cortez, meanwhile, fought several small skirmishes to the south, and as he did so, he kept circling closer and closer to the southern suburbs of the city. Jamarillo and Marina were with Cortez on this main advance, and Marina was in even lower spirits than she had been previously. When she got the reports from Iztapalapan, she cried for hours, wishing that it were a nightmare that she would wake from. But it was all hard, grim reality. Cortez was possessed, on this return trip to Tenochtitlan. Everything he did was for vengeance. He would not be satisfied, Marina finally knew, until the Aztec nation lay decimated at his feet. He no longer wanted only victory over them—there was no longer any talk about saving their heathen souls. What he wanted now was their blood, to atone for his humiliation at their hands.

A fever had him in its grip, and he would not be released from it until the Aztecs nation was destroyed.

Jamarillo had not left the army, on that day when Cortez invited him to. But one day when they were approaching the southern routes in to the city and were encamped not far from Cuernavaca awaiting word about the brigantines, Jamarillo went to Marina in a black mood. When he arrived, there were two Spanish women with Marina in their sleeping tent, but they left when he arrived, to give him and Marina privacy. The women who rode with Marina and slept with her guessed that there was something between Marina and Jamarillo but kept it all strictly among themselves. When the women had gone, Jamarillo sat heavily beside Marina on her cot. He was wearing armor, and a saber hung at his side. Marina studied his serious face, and realized

again that he was a very handsome young man.

"He has harassed me ever since Iztapalapan," Jamarillo began. "First he took some of my cavaliers and gave them to another captain. Now he reorganizes my rank structure within my unit, without consulting me."

"I'm sorry, Juan," Marina said tiredly. "I went to ask him how he liked the Christian name I chose for our baby, and he was too busy to see me. He is always too busy. It is over with us, Juan."

Jamarillo turned to her, and touched her arm. "Marina, leave this madness now. With me. I'll take you back to San Juan de Ulua, you and your child, and then to Hispaniola, if you'll come with me."

Marina was deeply touched. "Oh, holy Mary! I do love you, Juan Jamarillo!"

"Then let us take ourselves to our general, and tell him so," Jamarillo urged her. "He invited me to leave his company. I'll take you with me."

Marina was not prepared for such an offer. Her head spun with the idea, as she turned away from him to sort out her thoughts. "Even though his affection for me has diminished," she said at last, slowly and thoughtfully, "and he thinks now only of the conquest, he is a prideful man, Juan, as you know. If he knew we were lovers, he would be furious. It will make little difference if we go and tell him that we are in love."

Jamarillo's face darkened. "I don't give a damn what our general thinks of us! Let him rant and shout. We will still leave."

Marina shook her head. "I fear for you, Juan. He has great power over his army, and he is a clever man. He could make false charges against you and

have you executed. He is capable of such a thing in his present state, I believe."

"Damn it, let us do what we must, and him do what he must! I know only one officer who would allow Cortez such extravagance in his authority—Alvarado. And he is not here." He took her hand in both of his. "Everything has gotten out of control, Marina. We came to convert the heathen, not annihilate him. Cortez wants Aztec blood, and he has aroused the base instincts of the rank and file soldier. If we are not defeated at Tenochtitlan—and it may be that defeat for us would be the lesser of two evils—then there will be a bloodbath that neither you nor I will be able to stop. Do you want to stay to witness it?"

"No, of course not," she said heavily. "But isn't it possible that our presence here might make some small difference in the way the confrontation is conducted on both sides?"

He stared at the ground. A late afternoon sun filtered through the canvas and made his face amber in its light. "I don't know, dear Marina. But on the other hand, if we stay, aren't we accepting part of the responsibility for what happens from here on in, no matter what it is?"

"Not if we fight for sanity to the very end," Marina told him.

Jamarillo gazed into her lovely, dark eyes. "Then you won't come away with me?"

"I—think we would both feel better about it if we stayed through what is coming," she replied somberly.

"Then you might consider telling Cortez about us when this is finished?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Yes, Juan." It was a grave commitment, and one she did not take lightly. But she knew now that it would never be the same between her and the general. They were too different from each other.

Jamarillo smiled weakly. "Thanks, my love. You are a strong woman. You should have been princess of all the Malins."

"Perhaps I was needed more on this expedition," she mused quietly. "At any rate, I feel committed to the enterprise now. And I need you beside me, my beautiful warrior. My protector." She reached around him, and began unbuckling his breast-plate.

"I love you so much, sweet Marina," Jamarillo whispered to her.

She helped him remove the heavy armor, and then she was unfastening the arm and leg plates. Jamarillo unbuckled the heavy sword at his side, and dropped it to the ground. In a moment it all lay in a heap.

"Now you are my warrior disarmed," she smiled at him. "And a soldier without his weapons must occupy himself with things other than war, must he not?"

Jamarillo pulled her gently to him, welcoming the invitation. Since she had given birth he had left her to herself, physically, not asking for further intimacy between them, letting her heal, hoping that what she had felt for him on that previous occasion was not a temporary thing, and that she still wanted him. Now it was clear that his hopes were not empty ones. As he felt her full lips move against his now, and his hands found the soft, full curves under her light dress, he knew that Marina was his now—she no

longer belonged to Cortez or anybody else—and she always would be his.

"Oh, my lovely Marina!" he whispered to her hoarsely, his hands caressing her thigh. He moved the long dress up over her legs, up to the place where they met, and caressed her insistently there.

They could not be sure of privacy, so they did not undress on that second, impetuous occasion. Like the first time, Marina was aware of an increasing ability for enjoyment, rather than just performing for her partner, as Jamarillo brought her to the very height of arousal before he allowed himself to climax. Then his uneven breathing was heavy in her ear, and his fists clenched at the bed clothing beside her head, and their primitive sounds filled the tent as they crested emotionally in a rippling crescendo of sweet passion.

Cortez had no inkling of the love affair going on behind his back. When he had accused Marina of spending a lot of time with Jamarillo, he had merely been taunting her. He did not believe she could really prefer any other man to him. The idea simply did not occur to him.

Now he was ready to attack Xochimilco and Cuernavaca. If he succeeded against the garrisons in those suburban towns, he would be ready for his direct attack on the capital.

But now the brigantines arrived.

Ahead of schedule, Cortez' dream caravan came bursting onto the plain and down into the Valley of Mexico. There were a dozen boats of all sizes, broken down into various parts for ease of transportation. He had disassembled several of his

smaller ships in port—ships that had come to him through his victory over Narvaez, and with the arrival of new recruits later—and had had several boats built from native wood, in sections, and now they were all arriving at the shore of Lake Texcoco on carts and wagons, the most unusual naval operation the forces of royal Spain had ever been involved in.

Cortez now delayed his attack on Xochimilco to supervise the construction of the boats, taking Diaz and other captains with him. The Aztecs learned immediately of the arrival of Cortez' portable navy, and although Guatemozin was quite casual about it, his people were very upset by this development, and rightfully so. Within a few days the first Spanish boat was launched onto the lake, and then another and another. Guatemozin did not send his warriors after them yet, because they were kept at anchor near shore, under the protection of Cortez' cannons and guns. But then, on April 28 of that spring, the last boat was launched, the sails were rigged, and Cortez was ready for his concerted land-and-water assault on the capital itself. Canoes and pirogues of the Aztecs now gathered on the lake in swarms, and Guatemozin was certain that his navy would overwhelm those few large boats of the Spaniards as soon as they ventured from the shore.

By the time Cortez returned from distributing his inland navy along the Lake Texcoco shoreline, Cuernavaca was on the verge of falling under the attack of several of his captains, and that district town was taken a few days later, with another excessive shedding of blood. Jamarillo took part in the fighting, and made an attempt to prevent the killing of women and children, and was partially

successful. But with the return of Cortez, and the news that his navy was now on the lake, sanguine spirits rose again, and when the attack was ordered on Xochimilco, the Spaniards assailed that suburb with wild abandon.

It was on a cool, rather windy day that they stormed into that ancient town with its floating gardens and lush foliage. Cannons blasted the spring air, and musketry felled wave after wave of brave Aztec defenders. The advance of the Spaniards was slowed by the destruction of bridges on short causeways, but Cortez threw his best engineers into the fray, and they repaired the bridges well enough so that the army could pass.

The Tlaxcalans had come to the fore in the fighting beside the Spaniards, because of all Cortez' allies, they were the only ones who fought as fiercely as the Aztecs. They swarmed into town beside cavalry and infantry, and they killed wherever they found an Aztec, whether it was a man, woman or child.

The battle seemed to be going well when, near the end of it, the Spanish army almost lost its commander. Cortez was at the head of a cavalry unit near the one of Jamarillo, and they were engaged with Aztec warriors at a bridgehead. Aztecs were being cut down right and left, when suddenly a swarm of fresh defenders came shouting from a nearby side street, yelling shrilly for Spanish blood.

Marina, who had been given a mount again, and who had come up with some officers behind Jamarillo's cavalry unit, was just crossing the broken bridge, and saw the entire incident as she approached.

Cortez, seeing the attack of fresh Aztec troops,

rode wildly into their midst with his usual abandon, swinging his sword at heads and torsos. His men followed him, but then the Aztecs had surrounded Cortez and, recognizing him, began yelling "Malinche" and trying to drag him from his mount. His men were so busy defending themselves that they could not get to him. He swung his sword and split an Aztec skull wide open, then swung back the other way and slashed a bronze chest. But now the wild-looking animal's heads were all around his mount, and the metal claws on the bronze hands were grabbing at him from all sides. The white stallion stumbled, and fell heavily onto its side among them, and Cortez went down with it, his armor clanging loudly on the paving stones when he hit.

"Damned fiends!" he was yelling at them now, trying to disengage his leg from his fallen horse. *"Demons from hell!"*

He swung his sword, and an Aztec screamed and went down. Another grabbed his right arm, and then they were all over him. Claws raked his flesh wherever it was exposed, and one warrior started to stab a knife into Cortez' side. But before he succeeded, several of them were dragging Cortez along the cobblestones toward a nearby building, triumphant that they had captured the great Malinche for sacrifice. They had already taken a few Spaniards alive that day, and this was their crowning achievement, no matter if the Spaniards did occupy their town.

Cortez was being dragged along, fighting every inch of the way, swearing and trying to strike out at his captors.

"Oh, God!" Marina cried, from the near end of

the bridge. "*Juan! They have the general!*"

But Jamarillo and several others had already noticed Cortez' plight. A few Tlaxcalans had, too, as they stormed over the bridge, and one now hurled himself at the Aztecs, grabbing at them wildly, trying to pull them off Cortez. An Aztec jammed his knife into the Tlaxcalan's back, and the Tlaxcalan fell among his enemies.

But now Aguilar was riding into the melee, sword swinging, and two of his men were with him, and Jamarillo, hesitating for just a brief moment as he saw the situation of his hated commander, plunged into the chaos behind them. Aguilar reached Cortez first, and was hacking away at Cortez' captors. They peeled away from the general one at a time, defending themselves, and then Cortez was on his feet, fighting back again. An Aztec lunged at him from the side, and one of Aguilar's cavaliers cut him down in mid-air. Jamarillo knocked another one down, and still another, as Cortez now climbed onto Aguilar's mount, and relative safety.

Cortez' favorite stallion had been cut to pieces as he was being dragged away, and now lay dead in a pool of dark blood. One warrior had almost succeeded in severing its head before being driven off, and the mutilation was terrible.

Cortez now rode out of the fighting with Aguilar, and fresh infantry and Tlaxcalan warriors now rushed across the bridge, to drive the Aztecs back.

The general was saved.

Marina came up to them, a sword in her hand. Both Jamarillo and Cortez dismounted at the bridgehead at about the same moment, and both were wounded. Jamarillo had received a cut to the

head that was not serious, but which let considerable blood. As Marina dismounted, Cortez saw her, and thought she was coming to see how he was. But she went to Jamarillo.

"Juan! Are you all right?"

Jamarillo nodded, holding his head. "It is just a shallow wound."

Cortez, standing just ten feet from them, stared hard at Marina, and his eyes narrowed. When she finally turned to him, he was fixing her with a cold look.

"May I call the physician, General?" she asked, realizing now what she had done in front of several officers and men.

"Do you concern yourself?" he said acidly.

Marina blushed slightly. "Your welfare has always been of importance to me, my general," she said quietly.

"Indeed!" Cortez said bitterly, wiping blood from the side of his face. He had lost his helmet when he was unhorsed. He turned to several infantry officers who were approaching, over the bridge. *"Deploy into those side streets! Kill the bloody bastards wherever you find them! Move up! Move on up!"*

The other officers had now moved off, except for Jamarillo. Aguilar was off getting Cortez another mount, and there was a moment, standing beside a destroyed building near the bridgehead, when the three of them—Cortez, Marina, and Jamarillo—were alone.

Cortez had cleaned his face. He came very close to Jamarillo and Marina, and stared hard into Jamarillo's eyes.

"What goes on here?" he growled at Jamarillo.

Jamarillo glared back at him. "I don't understand your meaning, General."

"I think you do. What is it you attempt with my woman?"

"Your woman!" Jamarillo asked incredulously. "It was my understanding she is a Christian, and a free woman."

"Please—" Marina began.

"*Nevertheless, she is my woman!*" Cortez shouted into Jamarillo's face. "*And you woo her behind my back, is it not true?*"

Jamarillo was about to admit their affair angrily, but Marina hastily interceded. "Juan has real affection for me," she said quickly. "A commodity that I have seen in small quantity from any other source!"

Cortez turned on her threateningly. "Do you have no virtue, Malin woman? No pride? Do you wish to bear a child to every soldier in my army?"

Marina's face now flushed, and Jamarillo drew the blood-smeared sword at his side.

"How dare you speak to her like that! You have insulted her honor, damn you!"

An officer who still stood not far from them, and who had heard Jamarillo raise his voice, saw Jamarillo's threatening move, and raised a pistol toward Jamarillo. "Hold, there!"

But Marina grabbed Jamarillo's arm, very frightened now. "No, Juan! He is the general!"

Jamarillo turned to her, and stared blankly into her face for a moment, and then angrily plunged his sword back into its scabbard. Cortez had not flinched through the incident. He glared now at Marina.

"You will keep yourself to the women's quarters," he grated out, "and cause me no further embarrassment." Then he turned to Jamarillo. "As for you, Captain, since you have elected to fight with us after all, I order you to keep away from the women in this expedition, and particularly the Dona Marina!"

"General, no!" Marina said hollowly.

"Do you presume to govern my personal life also?" Jamarillo said heatedly to Cortez.

An officer had brought up a dark stallion for Cortez now. Cortez glanced at the man, then eyed Jamarillo with cold hostility. "You have been warned!" he growled.

A moment later, while Jamarillo stood and fumed, Cortez mounted the proffered horse, ignoring Jamarillo and Marina now as if they were not there.

"*Forward! Forward!*" he called out to his columns of infantry that now swarmed past him. "*We must occupy this garrison by nightfall!*"

Then he moved off with several cavalry officers toward the sound of the fighting, behind his rampaging, looting army.

Chapter Fifteen

But now Guatemozin was ready.

His thousands of Aztec warriors were massed at the causeways and on Lake Texcoco in greater numbers than the Spaniards had ever seen before. A few Spaniards had been captured again, along with some Tlaxcalan warriors, and their screams of anguish had pierced the night as Cortez approached the great causeways of the city with his main columns in the south. The Aztec gods had had their appetites whetted, and now they wanted more Spaniards to satisfy their blood-hunger.

Cortez knew he had to control the lake in order to successfully attack the capital. So he took charge of the small navy himself, and just a few days after his success at Xochimilco his boats sailed out into the lake to meet the thousands of smaller boats of the Aztecs and engage them in battle. His troops had already engaged masses of howling, wild-looking Aztecs at the far ends of the causeways, and had been unable to pierce their defenses with the Spanish vulnerability from the water. So the brigantines sailed out to command the lake that surrounded the capital.

Guatemozin sent every boat he could find into the lake to challenge the Spaniards, and massed warriors along the near shore, but it was not as easy to sink or overwhelm the larger boats of the Spaniards as he had thought. And Cortez' good luck held, too, when a strong breeze came up on that day of battle, allowing the Spaniards to move swiftly and tack easily. The larger boats would sail headlong into a swarm of smaller ones, demolishing them as they collided and sending them to the bottom of the lake, while hordes of Aztecs tried to swarm aboard. The Spaniards who manned the boats were under a hail of arrows and stones from the moment of confrontation, and it did not end until the latter part of the day, when the small boats of the Aztecs had suffered such losses that the Spaniards were beginning to have their way on the lake, sailing among the survivors and picking them off with guns and crossbows, and ramming the pirogues, causing them to capsize.

By the end of that long day of the lake battle, Cortez was in command of the battle for Tenochtitlan. His boats roved the lake at will, clearing it of hostile defenders, and Cortez' infantry began crossing the causeways without harassment from the water.

Within several days of the lake battle, Cortez' troops had secured beach-heads on the city side of every causeway. The Aztecs had fought valiantly to force the Spaniards back into the water, but with their guns and armor concentrated at these strong points, the Spaniards soon made their superiority of weapons count. The Aztecs were not able to take advantage of their overwhelming numbers, because

of the restricted space, and when Cortez had secured these vital points, he brought his Tlaxcalan warriors across the causeways in large numbers, and they spread out along the perimeter of the city, widening the breach.

Guatemozin, dumbfounded that he no longer controlled his own inland sea, and shocked that the Spaniards were once again in his beautiful capital, began to realize that the Spaniards were winning. He had not really believed that Cortez could take Tenochtitlan, with all its warriors and citizenry up in arms, but now doubts assailed him. He knew nothing to do but to order a redoubled effort by his people to hurl the invaders back. In the next few days, he distributed more weaponry to his troops, had canal bridges destroyed, and ordered perimeter buildings burned, rather than let them fall into the hands of the Spaniards and give them fortresses from which to fire on the city.

Several days after the victory in the lake battle, Jamarillo was almost captured in street fighting, but Aguilar saved him. Cortez, pleased with his personal leadership in the lake victory, no longer rode at the head of his troops in street fighting. There were too many Aztecs now, and the danger of capture too great. About fifty Spaniards had been taken captive in these past few days of fierce fighting, and it was rumored that they were being held for a mass offering to Huitzilopotchli, Guatemozin believing that this sacrifice would so please the gods that they would help him repel the invaders. Nobody talked much about this in the Spanish camp, but the grim reality of it was always in the back of their minds.

In this period, the fighting was heavy during the

day, but both sides would generally fall back at night, dragging corpses and wounded out of the streets. Cortez had begun to create work parties of Tlaxcalans now, to fill in the canals as they were taken, and large wagon-loads of dirt and rock was brought up for that purpose. The canals made the city easier to defend, so Cortez was getting rid of them one at a time. Guatemozin cursed his military brilliance, and exhorted his warriors to fight harder to repel the invaders.

Time was now on the side of the Spaniards and their Tlaxcalan allies. They had all they wanted to eat and drink from the gardens surrounding the city. But the inhabitants of the capital were running low, and their resolve was lessening. Some were already beginning to sneak out of the city at night, evacuating in the advance of the Spaniards.

Marina heard the reports of the masses of dead warriors, in her encamped position just beyond the causeways, and of the starvation and sickness of the populace, and with every day that passed, she became more and more troubled. She had not seen the conquest of Mexico as the destruction of the Aztec nation and its great society. It was time to stop the slaughter. With that in mind, she went to Cortez one day just before sunset, when the fighting in the city had just about stopped for the day. Cortez had seen almost nothing of Marina since his confrontation with her and Jamarillo, and when he had spoken to her briefly, there had been no warmth between them.

Cortez' tent was under heavy guard, but after a brief wait, she was ushered in to him. Upon seeing her, he dismissed the guard who brought her, and

they were alone. It was getting dark outside, and the tent was already lighted with several lanterns.

"Well!" Cortez said when they were alone together. "The princess deigns to speak with her general!"

"Good evening, Hernando," she said quietly, looking into his eyes to assess his mood. She was dressed in a laced Spanish dress, and looked quite lovely to him.

His face softened slightly, and she thought she caught a glimpse of the old Cortez there.

"Have you come, perhaps, to apologize for your recent behavior behind my back," he suggested, "with that arrogant Jamarillo?"

Marina did not take offense. "I have not come to talk of us at all, General," she said, lapsing into his title to address him, because he had destroyed the small feeling of warmth she had had for him upon entering the tent.

"I am having him watched," Cortez said smugly. "Does he miss your bed, Malinche? Or will you deny that you have taken him there?"

Marina did not feel like denying anything, suddenly. Her face flushed slightly. "I deny nothing."

"Then you have slept with him?" Cortez growled.

"Yes!" she blurted out. "Yes, yes, yes!"

Cortez had been sitting at a small table. He now rose darkly, angry, because he had not really believed they had been intimate.

"Damn you both! I'll have that impudent bastard court-martialed! I'll do it now!"

Marina spoke very tautly to him, her voice charged with emotion. "That would seem very

foolish, since Jamarillo is one of your best cavalry officers," she said harshly. "And since there is nothing left between us."

Cortez' hard eyes narrowed on her. "Nothing between us! By God, *I'll* say when there is nothing between us!"

She did not flinch before him. "You have already said it, General, without saying it," she said evenly. She looked away from him. "Anyway, I came to speak of other matters. It seems to me, and to several of your officers, that there has been enough carnage. Let us at least try to end it now, before the Aztecs are destroyed as a people. You are receiving allies every day from their surrounding neighbors. We grow stronger while they grow weak. You have what you wanted—all the Aztecs' cousins have turned on them. Someone must make Guatemozin see this."

Cortez regarded her somberly. "My officers—? Enough carnage! Have you now become a lover of Aztecs, as well as a camp woman!"

Marina was suddenly very angry. "*I have become a Christian!*" she said loudly. "*Are you?*"

Cortez' face flushed visibly, and for a moment, Marina feared for her very life. But he slowly got his anger under control. "I was a Christian, madame, when you were kneeling before stone idols, and before you knew the name of Christ!" he grated out hoarsely. "Do not presume to instruct me, now, in the ways of the True Faith!"

"I do not seek to instruct," she went on emotionally. "I merely ask your permission to go speak with Guatemozin."

His face changed again. "You would go?"

She nodded, getting herself under control. "Let me go to him. A peace overture from us may be all he

needs, to save face. Let me promise him that his city will be saved, and that his nobles will participate in a joint government upon a peaceful surrender by him."

Cortez' eyes changed subtly. The anger was still there, and the frustration, but now he hid it from her. "How many of my officers have you talked with about this?"

She shrugged. "A few."

"Including, I suppose, that damned Jamarillo?" he suggested, trying to get an admission from her.

But she had not seen Jamarillo since Cortez' warning. She had not considered it safe for him. "You advised us to remain apart," she said stiffly.

He grunted. He knew how dangerous a trip into the city would be for her, but he no longer cared. "All right," he said, "you may go to Guatemozin. Give him my regards, and suggest that a prompt surrender will save his city from ruin, when we attack tomorrow."

Marina lowered her eyes. "I—appreciate the opportunity," she said softly.

"You will not see Jamarillo beforehand," he added deliberately. "It may never be the same between us, Malin princess. But I will not abide your cavorting with one of my officers, by God! Now or ever!"

She did not bother reminding him that he had once offered her to Alvarado for a night. He was a different man now. "I'll leave for the Royal Palace immediately," she said, ignoring the threat. "I should be back in a couple of hours."

Cortez nodded gravely. "I'll arrange for your guard," he said.

Cortez sent only a half-dozen cavaliers with Marina, not wanting to gamble more men on such a venture. They left in mid-evening, crossed the nearby causeway quickly, where brigantines guarded its banks, then rode through the Spanish camp on the far side. When the small contingent got to the Aztec sentries, further into the city, and within sight of the towering Great Temple, the Aztecs saw the white banner of truce they carried, and allowed them to approach. A warrior general was soon talking to Marina, and soon thereafter she was being escorted past the Palace of Axayacatl—the old Spanish headquarters—on her way to the Royal Palace. A short time after that, they were admitted to the palace, and Marina was taken into the throne room, where Guatemozin sat glumly on Montezuma's old throne.

"Well, well," he said, when the bowing was finished, and Marina stood humbly before him. "The Malinche. You come to plead for mercy for your general, perhaps?"

Marina knew the threat was an empty one, since Guatemozin was almost beaten militarily. She studied his young face, and saw the grim hopelessness just behind his dark eyes.

Marina shook her head solemnly. "I come to plead for the Aztecs," she told him.

The big room was lighted by flaming braziers, and the faces of several advisors standing near Guatemozin were illuminated by their flickering light. "Hah!" one of them said loudly now. "A Malin pleads for Aztecs!"

"A Malin who has betrayed her people, and caused the death of Montezuma, and let the blood of

thousands of our brave warriors," a second, tall noble spoke up.

Guatemozin eyed her darkly. "You dare come here to me, purporting to plead for my people?" he asked acidly. "After what you have helped the white Malinche to do in Anahuac?"

"I believe in the white man's God," she replied to him. "I wanted only to help spread the word of His goodness, among the peoples of Mexico. I never wanted blood. Now I come to attempt to stop its flow."

Guatemozin looked beyond Marina, to where her armored guard waited, unharmed, in an outer corridor. He had been shocked by their appearance in the palace.

"If you want to stop the killing," he told her, "persuade these invaders of Anahuac to surrender themselves to us. Perhaps we may spare a few, to send back to their king with news of our power and our mercy."

"You have half-a-hundred prisoners at the Great Temple, awaiting sacrifice this very night," Marina said. "Is this Aztec mercy?"

"It is Aztec justice," Guatemozin said harshly. "And it is tribute to our righteous and rightful gods, who have been grievously offended by the very demons whose hearts they shall devour this night!"

Marina stepped forward closer to him, and a plumed warrior nearby drew a long knife warily.

"Please, your majesty!" Marina urged. "Release the Spanish prisoners from their grim fate, and let me return to Cortez with the news that you will talk peace with him, and allow his army into your city for that purpose. He has promised to allow your

highness and your council to share in leadership, in an enlightened government of Anahuac."

"Cortez allows us, in a peace settlement, a part of what we already have!" Guatemozin said indignantly. "Such arrogance is not to be negotiated with! We will keep our city, and our government!"

Marina's eyes were moist, in the realization of eventual failure. "Your highness, Cortez' ranks have been swelled again today by the area tribes who yesterday called themselves friends of the Aztecs. The Tlaxcalans are just a portion of the warriors he now has to throw against you in his attack on the city. He controls the lake, and the perimeter of the city. Tomorrow, or the next day, he will be in the Royal Palace!"

"Not unless he comes over the dead bodies of every last Aztec in this great city!" Guatemozin exclaimed.

"If you fight to the last man, he will kill you to the last man," Marina said desperately. "He will not quit until he has won. That is the way he is. But if you sue for peace now, those of us around him who care about your people will persuade him to be fair in the peace that follows. And many Aztec lives will be spared."

Guatemozin stared hard at her for a long moment, until a noble near him interrupted his thought. "You well remember Malinche's treachery, great emperor," he told Guatemozin. "There is no honorable peace with him, for us or for our gods."

Guatemozin nodded. "He is right, Malin woman. We will not surrender to the likes of your Cortez. He is not to be trusted."

Another advisor spoke up, from across the room.

"Arrest the woman, and her guard! They will be just in time for our ceremony at the Great Temple!"

Marina looked toward the fellow fearfully, then at Guatemozin. Guatemozin returned her stare. "No," he said finally. "She came in good faith. Allow her to return to her white friends, whom she has chosen over her own people."

"They may have sent her as a spy!" the tall warrior said to Guatemozin. "She will know the disposition of many of our troops!"

"They already know," Guatemozin said. "Ce Mallinali, take your leave while you can."

It was clear from his tone that there was no point in further discussion. Marina turned and left the room, with Guatemozin staring hard after her.

In the corridor, her six cavaliers were surrounded by fifty hostile Aztec warriors. She joined them, and a noble came from the throne room, and whispered something to the captain of the Aztec guard. Marina took little interest in the exchange until she got outside the palace, and began noticing the expressions on the faces of their guards. Then, not far from the palace entrance, with crowds of dark-faced citizens around them on the streets, the guard suddenly and without warning attacked Marina and the Spaniards, before they reached their horses.

It all happened very fast. There was some wild yelling as they descended on their truce-flag guests, and wielding of knives and the multi-blade clubs. The Spanish cavaliers put up a brief fight, and one killed an Aztec warrior with his sword before being stabbed over and over by several Aztecs. Marina was seized by three warriors and separated from the melee, so she would not be hurt. In just moments it

was over. Two Spaniards lay dead on the paving stones of the night street, and four others and Marina were prodded toward the Great Temple, where drum-beats and horn-blowing announced the beginning of the ceremony.

When the crowd in the big square saw Marina and the four Spaniards, a great cheer went up as they recognized her. The Aztec warriors had to cordon off the area where Marina walked, to keep her from being clubbed down.

"There she is!"

"The Malin woman!"

"Dirty bitch of the white-skins!"

"Whore of the invaders!"

Marina and her companions were now within the vast ring of the crowd, in the open space at the foot of the Great Temple. Priests stood on the broad steps, which were lined with braziers all the way to the platform top. More priests stood up there, decorated in plumage and finery. At the base of the steps, clustered together like lambs at a slaughterhouse, were fifty-odd Spaniards, waiting for the terrible ceremony above. They wore only the pants of their uniforms, naked to the waist and barefoot. The armor that had been taken off them previously was now set around the base of the pyramid, in a regular pattern, like trophies.

Most of the men so assembled were grimly silent, but a few moaned openly, thinking of what was to happen to them very soon. One was calling hysterically to the nearby priests, asking for mercy. But the ring of Aztec guards around them would allow no contact between them and the holy men.

Now Marina and her guards joined the group,

and were prodded along with javelins. One soldier was stabbed in the process, and Marina's side was cut under her Spanish dress.

"Now!" an Aztec lord yelled at them. "Undress down to your trousers!"

Marina translated for the men. The other captives had seen them now, and some were murmuring exclamations.

"They have captured the Malin girl!"

"The general will be furious."

But another one mumbled, "He will not care."

Marina turned to the noble who had given the order to them, and saw the council member who had urged their sacrifice before Guatemozin, near him. "The emperor told you to release us!" she said loudly.

"The emperor cares little one way or the other," the fellow replied to Marina. "He will not attend the ceremony tonight. He has a war council that will last until dawn. By that time, all of you will have sated the hunger of Huitzilopotchli. If Guatemozin inquires about you, Malin, we shall explain that some underling misunderstood." He turned to the other noble. "Have her strip off all the Spanish clothing. Our people are entitled to see what a woman looks like who will sleep with the white-skins."

Marina started to object, but then he was gone. A moment later she was being roughly stripped by two husky Aztec warriors. The nearest Spaniards turned and watched dully as this diversion took place, but none tried to prevent it. In a moment, Marina stood naked on the fringe of them, with Spaniards and Aztecs alike staring at her nudity. She huddled, tears

in her eyes, between the gawking Spanish men and Aztec men, her bronze body glowing in the soft light from the nearby braziers. She had never been so humiliated, nor so afraid.

"Now how do you fare, Malin whore?" some Aztec woman yelled, from the crowd beyond their warrior guards.

"Let us have her, before the priests!" some Aztec male yelled.

Another Aztec broke loose from the crowd and rushed toward her, knocking an Aztec guard aside, and then he was throwing her to the pavement. One of the Spaniards who had brought Marina there pulled the Aztec off, an Aztec guard jammed a javelin into his posterior ribs, and the fellow fell heavily to the ground, gasping and bleeding. Another Aztec warrior now came and grabbed the impetuous citizen, and pushed him roughly away from Marina and the other prisoners, shouting a profanity at him.

A second Spaniard who has come with Marina still held his tunic, not having discarded it yet. He came now to Marina, helped her to her feet, and draped the tunic around her hips. A warrior guard started toward him, but the noble in charge waved him off. Marina fastened the tunic around her hips, and was now attired in the manner of poorer women of the region, with her full breasts bare. She had just thanked the Spanish cavalier, when a procession entered the square carrying grim-looking objects, blood-smeared. Marina took one look and saw they were the mutilated carcasses of the horses they had ridden into the city. A further murmuring went up among the Spaniards, and Marina gasped loudly.

The lesser priests carried the animal parts to the base of the pyramid temple, and placed them around it, spaced between the piles of empty armor.

And now the drum-beat resumed. Orders were shouted from the top of the pyramid, and the Spanish soldiers nearest the steps were formed into a line. The first half-dozen were started up the steps, under guard. Looking up to the apex, Marina could see the priests up there with their proud plumage. One of the three held a sharp stone dagger aloft, showing it to the crowd. There was a roar of approval from the massed assemblage.

Marina stared upward and licked dry lips. This was the fate that she had dreaded since childhood, the one that Malin mothers used to frighten their children into behaving. She wondered whether, after that first trauma of the knife going in, she would still be conscious to feel the horror of her live heart being snatched from her breast. She prayed that it would all be over when the knife went in.

The first Spanish soldier went to the top without difficulty, but his legs gave way under him at the top, and guards had to carry him to the ceremonial block. Marina could see them placing him in a supine position, and two priests taking his arms to hold him down. Now a small cry escaped from his throat as he saw the dagger. The plumed priest bent over him, and Marina saw the dagger placed beside his breastbone, and she wanted to turn away, but found that she could not. Suddenly, the priest shoved hard on the dagger, and the figure on the block jumped and quivered, and then the butcher-priest was jamming his hand into the ragged wound. A moment later he held a dripping, bloody heart aloft, and the

crowd roared. He turned to a fourth priest, who hurried to the nearby sanctum of Huitzilopotchli, where Marina knew the heart would be placed in the mouth of the stone god.

The sacrificed Spaniard was now mercifully dead. The guards came forward, up there, and dragged his limp corpse off the stone block and hurled it ignominiously down the steps. Another roar came from the crowd.

Marina thought for a moment that she would be sick on the pavement, but she held it back. Now an Aztec warrior came up to her and moved her forward, up to the front of the group of captives, right behind the half-dozen who had been lined up on the steps of the temple. The crowd had been shouting for the Malin, and the warriors had decided to oblige. They had waited long enough for the capture of the Malin traitor. Now their vengeance would be wrought.

The second Spaniard did not go peaceably. He began fighting his guards halfway up the steps, and was knocked lightly on the head, and then carried kicking to the sacrificial altar, where he revived and began screaming before he was touched by the knife. Now the guards were moving the other captives up the steps slowly, in their turn. The knife went in the second time, the screaming stopped, and a second corpse was hurled down the steps, near Marina, and she saw the ragged, bloody hole in his chest.

It was just a matter of minutes, she knew, until she would ascend the platform, and be held down on that bloody block of stone. She should have foreseen this end, she thought, when she gave her loyalty to the general called Cortez who spoke of a God of gods

and used his sword like a scythe. Maybe this end was predictable—even justified.

There was a yell from above—the third captive had been killed on the block. Marina looked up and saw the crimson-smeared priest come and take the pulsing heart and run with it to the sanctuary tower nearby. The third body came hurtling down the steps, bumping dully, and a fourth Spaniard was taken to the block. Down below, more Spaniards were being lined up, and when one was prodded into line, he suddenly yelled wildly and broke and ran. He got past the warriors, but then the spectators swarmed on him. Before he could be retrieved by the Aztec warrior guards, he was cut to pieces by the cutting weapons of the locals.

Marina was now prodded on upward, and there were only a couple of Spaniards and thirty steps separating her from eternity. She closed her eyes and prayed to Jesus and Mary, trying to close out the sights and sounds around her. She knew that the troops at the perimeter of the city must be aware by now that she and her escort had been captured, and the news had probably reached Cortez. But the general did not plan his all-out attack until the following morning, and he would not risk ruining his strategy to save her and a handful of soldiers.

"All right, you!" a guard said harshly, nudging her with a sharp javelin. "You are next!"

Marina moved on up to the top steps, just as the sixth Spaniard was taken to the block. She was level with the priests and the action now, and it was even more horrible for her. The burly priests pinned the rather thin Spaniard to the block, and the tall priest with the gaudy plumage stood beside him raising the

bloody knife. The crowd roared. On the steps below her, lesser priests were hacking the heads off the previous victims, to hoist onto trophy poles.

The priest with the dagger, grim-faced, raised the stone knife above the Spaniard's chest, and then lowered it into place. But then, the crowd suddenly fell silent—more silent than they had been since Marina's arrival in the large square.

Marina and the other captives turned and stared at the locals, and the priest with the dagger stood up from his bent position over his victim, and the Aztec guards all up and down the steps turned and gazed toward the side streets leading into the square.

Then Marina heard it. It was a dull roaring at first, and a sound like distant thunder. Then she could distinguish the noises of yelling and screaming, and the distinct clattering of hoofbeats on the ancient paving stones.

"It is the white-skins!" someone from the crowd said loudly.

"Malinche comes!" another yelled hysterically.

"Run!" some woman yelled. *"Run for your lives!"*

Marina had never witnessed such a sudden change of mood in a crowd. A moment ago they had yelled savagely for blood, and now they were in an hysterical panic such as she had never seen before. The Spaniards at the base of the steps were yelling and whooping, new hope in their faces.

It took only a moment for it all to explode into chaos. The crowd below began running helter-skelter in all directions, and then Marina could see Cortez' cavalry storming down the cobbled street toward the square. They had already cut through the weak defenses on that side of the city, and had driven

right past other defenders to reach the central square. They came like demons, scattering all before them, racing headlong into the square, brandishing their swords and cutting stragglers down, and Marina saw them for the first time as the Aztecs must have seen them, and she understood their terror. Cortez' cavalry had never looked so magnificent to her.

Now they were in the square, killing and mutilating, their steeds wild-eyed, sword-blades glistening. Horses reared and plunged, Aztecs yelled, and the Spaniards cursed. Behind the cavaliers came the infantry in long columns, hurrying to the square, and with them were thousands of wild Tlaxcalans. It was obvious that Cortez was throwing everything at them. Now Tlaxcalans came from other side streets, and Aztec warriors were fighting valiantly, but against a whirlwind fury.

The priest at the sacrificial block had hesitated in his butchery, and the Spaniard had burst loose, but then had been stabbed in the back by an Aztec guard. Now guards below were running at prisoners with javelins and sharp knives, killing and maiming before they were themselves killed. A few Spaniards were killed in this process, but then the warrior guards were defending themselves. Marina hesitated on the steps, not knowing what to do, and an Aztec guard came running down the steps with a javelin. He came wild-faced, desperate, and just before he could drive the weapon between her bared breasts, an arrow from a crossbow thudded into his side and came partway out his back. He made a guttural sound and fell at Marina's feet.

Now Tlaxcalans and infantry were scaling the steps of the temple, and the priests were running for their lives. Marina got a glimpse of Aguilar in the square as she now descended, and other men she knew well. They were routing the enemy, and already controlled the square. The booming of cannons could be heard in other parts of the city, and musket fire. It was the big surprise offensive, and it was working. The Aztec army was being caught flat-footed, and were being overwhelmed.

Marina looked for Jamarillo, and could not see him. She wondered if Cortez had imprisoned him. She descended the steps to the square, and an Aztec warrior hurled himself at her from nowhere. She was knocked to the ground, and she saw him raise a multi-bladed hatchets over her head. But then a sword swung down upon him, and his eyes went wide, and he rolled off her, his neck cut almost through. She looked up, and there was Cortez, his helmet visor pushed up.

He looked very martial and frightening, astride the dark mount. He held his hand down to assist her, and she took it as she rose to her feet. "I heard you were dead," he said quietly. "I am glad that you are not."

"You give me my life again, General," she said.

"Come," he said, hoisting her aboard his horse.

"We will go to the Royal Palace together."

Marina rode with Cortez to the palace then, where there was some minimal fighting, and then Cortez was striding boldly into the great halls, with Aguilar and Sandoval beside him. Marina hung back, looking for Jamarillo, and now another panic rose in her, that he was dead. She asked about him,

and was told that he had ridden in with them.

Cortez, in the throne room, learned that Guatemozin had just fled, intending to leave the city with the thousands of others who were evacuating in advance of the Spaniards' onslaught. Guatemozin had taken a few bodyguards with him, and a few harem women, including Linala, who had become one of his wives. The new emperor was not staying to see the last wrath of the invaders fall upon his people.

His empire had collapsed around him.

Mexico belonged to Cortez.

Marina, clothed again in her discarded dress retrieved from the Great Temple, wandered about near the front entrance of the palace, scanning the troops inside and out, and asking everyone she met whether he had seen Jamarillo. No one had. Soldiers were now pouring into the palace from all sides, taking possession of it, raising the flag of Spain. Corpses of palace guards still lay obscenely on the tiled floors, and blood smeared the walls.

Marina had almost given up on finding Jamarillo, when she entered a room off the main hall, and almost ran into him as he was leaving it, sword in hand. He stopped short and stared at her, as if he had seen a spirit. His face was sweaty underneath the raised visor of his helmet, and blood seeped from a wound on his left thigh. But he was otherwise all right. He took the helmet from his head, a grin slowly spreading over his face.

"Thank God! You're alive! I had given up hope!"

"Oh, Juan!" she cried out, tears welling into her eyes. "Oh, Mary and Jesus!" She threw her arms around him in his armor, and he held her tightly with

his free arm. Two other officers who had been in the room with him exchanged grins and left.

As they stood there embracing, Cortez came striding down the hall outside and saw them. He stopped and scowled, and then came into the room. Aguilar and Sandoval paused in the doorway behind him.

"I love you so much, dear Juan!" Marina was sobbing. "So very, very much!"

She was unaware of Cortez' presence, but Jamarillo had now seen him. Marina saw his eyes change, and turned and saw the general.

"By Jesus!" Cortez rasped out throatily.

Jamarillo pushed Marina gently aside, and faced his general, his sword still in hand.

"Oh, God, no!" Marina whispered.

Cortez drew his sword in a sweeping, menacing motion, and held its glistening blade between them. He was the best swordsman of his cavaliers, and everybody present knew it.

"Now, damn you!" he said in a growl, and his eyes had that emotional glitter in them that Marina had seen before, on several occasions.

But Aguilar now stepped between Cortez and Jamarillo. "Don't do it, General!" he said hoarsely.

Cortez hesitated, the sword still in position, and he trembled slightly with emotion for a long moment. Then he suddenly turned and hurled the weapon violently to the floor. It clattered across the floor. Jamarillo flinched slightly when it hit, and then his face changed as he studied Cortez' features.

Cortez turned angrily from them all for a moment, breathing very hard. This personal defeat at the height of his great victory was maddening to him. But, because of what he and Marina had been

to each other, he could not destroy her love. The anger flowed slowly out of him, and it was replaced by a lonely, empty feeling deep inside him.

Marina came over to him, and touched his arm, but he would not acknowledge her.

"Whatever I am, or will be, I owe to you," she whispered into his ear. "But—I love him."

Cortez turned now to her.

"I want her with me always," Jamarillo said quietly, in the silence of the room.

Aguilar and Sandoval watched Cortez' face tensely. He glanced toward Jamarillo for a brief moment, then looked deep into Marina's dark eyes. His face had changed again, and he looked to Marina almost as he had on that first day aboard ship at San Juan de Ulua, when he had smiled at her for the first time.

"All right," he said heavily. "Something has finished, and something else begun, here in this room." He looked toward Jamarillo again. "Take good care of her, Captain, in the New Spain we will build from these ruins."

Jamarillo nodded. "I expect to, General."

At that moment, an infantry officer came rushing into the room, his face flushed. "General! Guatemozin has been captured in his royal barge! He has asked to meet with you at dawn, for a formal surrender of the city!"

A silence fell over the room again. Now, with Guatemozin's capitulation, the conquest seemed official.

"Congratulations, General," Aguilar said to Cortez.

Cortez stared hard at the floor for a moment, then looked up at them. It was unbelievable that it was all

finished. He had fulfilled a destiny he had known to be his from the moment he had left Cuba, and now, no matter what King Charles later decided, at the moment he was Anahuac's new lord and master. A hundred ideas and half-formed thoughts flitted through his head about the new government he would establish, and the reforms he would make, under the banner he had carried from Havana.

He nodded acknowledgment of Aguilar's congratulations, and turned soberly to Sandoval. Already the empty feeling was leaving him, and he was swelling inside with the knowledge of his new power over an empire he had wrested from the heathens. He cast one more quick look toward Marina, and their eyes locked for a long moment, and then he was striding back out into the corridor, with Jamarillo and Marina looking after him.

"I want Guatemozin received here with the greatest courtesy," he was saying as he left. "He is their emperor, and they will respond to us as we respect him and what he stands for. Of course, I will want a sizeable coterie of armed men in my retinue. We are their new partners, but we are also their conquerors."

His voice trailed away then, and he was gone from their sight and, Marina knew, from her life. There would never be any going back to what Cortez once was, or what they had meant to each other when that march inland had begun from San Juan de Ulua to Cempoalla.

That all seemed a thousand Aztec years in the past.

Cortez, and all he had wrought, now belonged to Anahuac's unknown and unknowable future.